



Research Plan

2022 – 2027

Context

Our Mission

Our University's mission to be open to people, places, methods and ideas is delivered through our values of inclusivity, innovation and responsiveness. Within our mission we state a commitment to create world-class research. This commitment has been strengthened by our University Strategy for 2022 to 2027 entitled 'Learn and Live', in which a goal is to enhance our societal impact through research, enterprise and skills development.

Current Scale and Recent Successes

With over 650 REF-returned academic and research staff working with teams of professional services and technicians, nearly 1000 postgraduate research students, including 200 research students in 18 Affiliated Research Centres distributed across the world, and projects across all four nations of the UK, we are a large research institution with comprehensive coverage of research fields across all four Faculties. We publish around 1800 academic outputs per year and collaborate with over 100 external partners. In addition to our Faculty-based research, we have invested in five Strategic Research Areas (SRAs) and benefited from their interdisciplinary approach. This Plan builds on the hard work and successes of the Faculties and SRAs as set out in our previous research plan covering the period of 2018 to 2023.

Benefits of Research

Research delivers many benefits to our University. First and foremost, our research contributes to improvements across society and thereby helps us to achieve our core mission. Beyond this fundamental reason, we also undertake research because:

- Our students enjoy a research-informed curriculum and direct opportunities to engage in research projects.
- Research activities enable our staff (academic, technical and professional) to develop their careers.
- Our research generates impacts across all four nations of the UK.
- Research opportunities are essential for recruitment and retention of academic staff.
- Research is a key foundation of our international reputation as a University and our brand.
- Our research underpins public engagement, knowledge exchange, enterprise and scholarship.



External landscape

When the OU was established in 1969, our central purpose was to provide access to higher education to enhance social mobility. More than 50 years later it could be argued that access to education is not enough. In 2022, to share in the benefits of our global society you need to be actively involved in research and innovation. With automation and artificial intelligence changing our lives and careers, we must offer wider access to research-informed opportunities created by being a part of the innovation process. Therefore, research is growing in importance as a contributor to the OU's mission.

The external landscape is changing rapidly. Our research plan must respond to this pace of change and align with UK priorities and United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. The research plan has been informed by the challenges presented in reports, concordats and policies such as the UK Innovation Strategy, R&D People and Culture Strategy, Levelling Up the United Kingdom, UK Research & Innovation (UKRI) EDI Strategy and many others highlighted throughout our plan.

This plan also responds to the challenges and opportunities created by the Covid-19 pandemic and the OU's commitment to sustainability. An increase in remote working, awareness of the direct impact of research and associated travel on the environment, and societal changes precipitated by the pandemic and the urgency of action on climate change require new approaches to research. We aim to create new and equitable ways of collaborating that take advantage of the uptake of technology during the pandemic, and to directly focus on sustainability projects where the OU, with partners, can make a global contribution.



Activities

Our University enhances the lives of our students, staff, alumni and partners through a wide range of activities including teaching, innovation, public engagement and sharing knowledge. The positive outcomes of our work are delivered by people with different roles within the OU and outside of our University. Through this plan we want the entire OU family, including students, alumni and collaborators, to be proud of our collective research and its impact. Some people will be directly involved in research, others will enable it by helping the OU to be successful and financially viable through other activities. Everyone is part of our research plan and shares in the successes.

To help bring everyone from across the OU into the research plan process we have consulted widely. Many students, staff and external partners have taken up the opportunity to contribute ideas that have shaped this plan. We had over 1800 responses to our survey on future societal challenges and numerous workshops and meetings have had excellent attendance and active contributions. This collaborative approach will continue as we implement our activities and there will be opportunities to shape our priorities throughout the period of the Learn and Live strategy.

The Research Plan will focus on five activities:

Activity 1: Open Societal Challenges

Activity 2: The Next Generation

Activity 3: Open Research

Activity 4: Building On Our Strengths

Activity 5: Improving Our Processes

Much of this plan is concerned with enhancing collaboration and interdisciplinary approaches. One of the strengths of the OU is our breadth of expertise, and bringing together diverse teams is increasingly important as universities across the world look to improve lives locally and globally. However, it is important to stress the continued importance of disciplinary research within our Schools and Faculties. Activities to help the next generation of researchers, to open up access to our research and to improve our processes aim to support the discipline-based research that is the long-term foundation for all other research activity.

This Research Plan also commits the OU to changing the way we conduct research and make decisions on prioritisation. We will seek to broaden the range of people, including students, who contribute to our decision-making processes. We will also reduce the negative environmental impact of research – directly through reducing the carbon footprint of OU research activity, and indirectly by championing and advancing the Open Research agenda, minimising the need for redundant duplication of research and maximising the use of existing research knowledge.

All universities must make difficult decisions about how to invest limited research funds and we acknowledge that many excellent projects will not be funded, but in making funding decisions we will listen to views from across the OU and from valued external collaborators.

Activity 1: Open Societal Challenges

Purpose

To enhance the impact of our research we will help interdisciplinary teams to focus on key societal challenges. We recognise that the Covid-19 pandemic has changed working practices and it will be harder for new collaborations to form. Therefore, we need to create new mechanisms for people to find each other, exchange ideas, form teams and work with external partners. We will strengthen our collaborations across the four nations of the UK to maximise the benefit of our unique reach.

Outcomes

We will set targets for:

- The number of new societal challenges proposed over the Learn and Live strategy period.
- The number of detailed project plans for new challenges.
- Increases in donation and/or research funding secured for challenges.

We will secure intellectual property for the online technology platform to enable licensing outside of the OU.

We will ask panels drawn from staff, students, alumni and external partners to undertake periodic detailed reviews of our societal impact supported by qualitative and quantitative methods.

Mechanisms

Invite staff and students to propose societal challenges that address problems and create opportunities in environmental sustainability, tackling inequalities and helping everyone to live well.

During our consultation we had over 1800 ideas from across the OU for future challenges we should address. Building on this exceptional engagement, we will hold regular events to explore challenge areas, drawing on experiences from within the OU and from external collaborators. We will publicly announce our intention to help solve key societal challenges and promote participatory action research. We will actively encourage students and staff from all job families to propose future challenges. We will open the challenge process to external contributions once the concept has been piloted within the University.

Resources will be invested to enable new teams to develop their approaches and established teams to mature their ideas.

Using feedback from societal challenge panels drawn from across our student and staff bodies, and including external stakeholders, we will prioritise time and financial investment in challenge areas where the OU has an opportunity to make a unique contribution. Investments will be tailored to specific needs of each project. Early-stage projects will require support to validate challenges and build teams. Later stage projects will require pump-prime funding to attract external investment or partnerships. We will create project plans that set out realistic pathways to impact.

Create a new online collaboration technology platform.

Drawing on OU expertise we will create a new online tool to allow people to publicise their societal challenges, fill gaps in their expertise and find external partners. We envisage this tool being made available for groups outside of the OU to use if this new model for stimulating collaboration is successful.

Activity 2: The Next Generation

Purpose

To deliver on our ambitions for research and achieve our social mission, we need a more diverse staff and research student population to bring a broad range of perspectives and experiences into our research culture and environment. We need to reduce barriers to engaging with research and focus resources to build the next generation of research leaders across our Faculties and in each of the four Nations.

Outcomes

We will set targets for:

- Diversity of staff and research students receiving internal support under any scheme within this plan.
- Graduation of research apprentices and evidence of continued involvement in research in future career.
- Increase in the number of externally funded fellows and in the number of fellows progressing to permanent roles at any university.
- PGR completion, Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES) overall satisfaction and diversity of our PGR applicants and registered population.
- Projects with a Four Nations or multi-nation impact.

Mechanisms

Improve our understanding of the barriers for the next generation.

We will increase our qualitative and quantitative analysis of research career progression at all career stages and for all protected characteristics within the OU. This analysis will be used to prioritise investment to tackle the most pressing issues.

Create opportunities for staff and students to be actively involved in decision-making processes throughout the implementation of this research plan.

We will continue to consult on the implementation and progress of this plan. As introduced under the societal challenges activity, we will create panels with memberships drawn from across our student and staff body and with contributions from external stakeholders. These panels will contribute to Research Board recommendations on resource allocation and will play a key role in assessing our progress against our stated outcomes.

Implement recommendations from our Postgraduate Research Futures Review (PGR Futures).

We will review current PGR programmes to strategically consider future developments within the changing external environment. The review will include consideration of on-campus (including four Nations) and online PGR environments, consider the opportunities to strengthen collaborations with Affiliated Research Centres and propose new models to collaborate nationally and internationally.

Prioritise societal challenges and other projects that embed mechanisms to support career progression and address inequalities.

Our criteria for prioritisation of support will include commitment to the next generation. For example, projects that include mentorship, diverse teams and other mechanisms to help the next generation will have a greater chance of receiving funding. Projects lacking these mechanisms will be supported to adopt best practice.

Mechanisms

Create a new research apprenticeship programme to enable people outside of the OU to engage with research relevant to their own careers and employers.

We will launch and actively encourage external partners to engage with a new apprenticeship that provides training in research methods and the opportunity to undertake research projects. This programme will directly address the OU mission by providing educational opportunity to open new routes into research active careers.

Simplify mechanisms to attract externally funded fellows.

We will work with our Faculties to create a single route to attract applicants who wish to apply for fellowships and to support them through their applications.

Raise the profile of the Technicians' Commitment and the Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers.

Pro-Vice-Chancellor chaired committees will oversee our implementation of plans to fully demonstrate our commitment to these important staff development statements.

Lead a national initiative where the OU can make an impact across the UK.

Building on our experience with undergraduate students with disabilities we will work with other universities and funders to address barriers in research career development for staff and research students with any or specific disabilities.



Activity 3: Open Research

Purpose

Research should be shared openly and widely to maximise its impact, enhance integrity and minimise waste. With our distinctive, open mission, our University should lead the way in fostering an open research culture.

Outcomes

We will set targets for:

- Increased data deposition on Open Research Data Online (ORDO) and increased downloads.
- Case studies of pilots for new publication routes.
- Increased output deposition on Open Research Online (ORO) and increased views and downloads.

Mechanisms

Establish a programme of open research advocacy to embed the principles and value of open research practices across the University.

Working in collaboration with the OU Library, we will introduce open research champions who work with research teams to increase their deposition of data/ outputs and improve accessibility. We will further invest in data archiving and research support infrastructure to maximise open availability and enable more use of archived content for future research activity.

Promote the use of innovative, accessible, and equitable models for research publishing that make research methods and results available quickly, at no cost to the reader, across all disciplines and career stages.

We will explore and pilot the use of new models for data and full paper publication. We will ensure that promotion and recruitment processes value new repository and publication routes alongside traditional routes of academic publication.

Prioritise societal challenges and other projects that embed mechanisms to enhance open research. Our criteria for prioritisation for support will include commitment to open research.

For example, projects with innovative data deposition and output dissemination, accepting different practices across disciplines, will have a greater chance of receiving funding. Projects lacking these mechanisms will be supported to adopt best practice.

Collaborate with other universities and research organisations to share new open access mechanisms.

Given the Open University's mission and unique place in higher education we will play an active role at UK level to share our expertise in open research.

Publish a Quarterly Review of OU Research.

We will explore new ways of publicising our research for internal and external audiences. A regular review that uses social media to bring to life our research could be a powerful way to raise our profile.



Activity 4: Building On Our Strengths

Purpose

Within our research portfolio there are teams and clusters that have the potential to deliver major impact. For those areas we recognise that competition is intensifying for external funding and to attract key partners. We also recognise that the overall reputation of our research is enhanced by the maturation of concentrated centres of excellence. Therefore, we aim to support major research collaborations that can compete with the very best and can deliver globally significant outputs and impact.

Outcomes

We will set targets for:

- Increased funding and donation for cross-University initiatives (if formed).
- Attraction of new staff and externally funded fellows to join centres of excellence where this helps achieve EDI targets.

Mechanisms

Develop business plans with Faculties for cross-University initiatives.

The affordability of investment in these centres of excellence will be dependent on building business plans that are sustainable beyond the timescale of any pump-priming investment. We will begin by considering sustainable models for areas grown within the Strategic Research Areas namely, astrobiology and space, educational technology and international development. If investment is available and justified we will extend this work to consider new initiatives in an open competition co-ordinated by Faculties.

Simplify our centre, institute and network structures to clarify our key research strengths and reduce administrative overhead.

We have many research groupings with no overarching naming conventions and considerable overlap in research across similar 'centres'. Each centre has an administrative overhead associated with set-up and running. In addition, the impact on external collaborations is diluted by the complexity and scale of our named 'centres' portfolio. Working with Faculties we will consider how we can clarify our structures. This will be an evolutionary process with the aim of steadily moving to a simplified structure over the next three years.

Strengthen submissions to future research assessment exercises.

REF continues to be important for the OU because it determines long-term QR funding for research and influences external perceptions. To maintain our investment in research through QR income and protect our external reputation for research we therefore need to secure our broad disciplinary research strength. To do this, we will develop plans at the institutional, faculty and disciplinary levels that build on REF 2021 outcomes and strengthen submissions to future research assessment exercises.

Activity 5: Improving Our Processes

Purpose

We are committed to providing a research environment that is supportive, inclusive and equitable, facilitates good research practice based on the principles of research integrity, and enables communities of researchers to undertake their best work.

We aim to be as efficient and effective as possible so we can concentrate our efforts on generating high quality research. Our funders expect careful oversight of the use of their investments, and our future QR allocation, as determined by our REF submission, is dependent on professional management of our research. We also have numerous compliance requirements that require governance over many aspects of our research. We aim to get the balance right between investing in the processes that facilitate research and our direct investment in research activity. A stakeholder review of research mechanics will inform the work within this activity.

Outcomes

We will set targets for:

- Growth in Faculty and institutional research income, enabled by the development and monitoring of bid pipelines.
- Increased number and value of interdisciplinary awards.
- Progress against Research Mechanics Action Plan priorities with improved processes and support.
- Staff time allocated to research.
- Environmental sustainability of research.
- TRAC-R values for investment of internal resources.

Mechanisms

Revise pre and post award processes.

In collaboration with Faculties, we will implement new processes to evolve our support. We will study processes in other institutions and amplify best practice within the OU.

Measure and monitor investment in staff time for research.

Our research mechanics review has highlighted concern, expressed by academic staff, about the available time to undertake research. Given the rapid changes to work patterns caused by Covid-19 across the OU, this concern is not surprising, but we need to ensure that our biggest investment in research, namely staff time, delivers ongoing excellence in research output and supports development of the next generation of researchers. As part of a focus on Transparent Approach to Costing (TRAC), we will analyse staff experiences of workload management and work with Faculties to optimise research time to enhance income generation and research quality.

Promote the OU's open societal challenges and distinctive research capabilities to significantly enhance our external research reputation, collaboration and funding opportunities.

We will actively seek out and work with like-minded donors, funders and collaborators to deliver societal impact.

Strengthen our commitment to the highest standards of Research Integrity by continuing to develop policies and processes to further improve research governance.

Research Committee will oversee new and/or updated institutional frameworks for research integrity, compliant with concordat commitments and regulatory requirements.

Improve the environmental sustainability of research.

Working collaboratively with institutional leads for sustainability, Estates, Procurement and others we will launch initiatives to help staff and research students improve the sustainability of their research. We will investigate the use of more sustainable consumables, the appropriate balance between physical and online conferences, minimising energy consumption and using open research to avoid unnecessary repetition of data generation (for example of 'negative' results).

open.ac.uk/research

The Open University is incorporated by Royal Charter (RC 000391), an exempt charity in England & Wales, and a charity registered in Scotland (SC 038302). The Open University is authorised and regulated by the Financial Conduct Authority in relation to its secondary activity of credit broking.

Copyright © 2022
The Open University.