

Making Sense of HEIF 2025 to 2031

Interpreting HEIF, engagement and impact in a changing
policy landscape

February 2026

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Introduction

This toolkit is designed to help universities make sense of recent changes to the Higher Education Innovation Fund (HEIF), and how to approach the HEIF Accountability Statement with clarity and confidence.

Rather than treating the guidance as a set of instructions to follow or boxes to tick, the toolkit offers a way of interpreting what HEIF is asking for, grounded in the policy context and evidence that underpin the guidance itself. It is intended for anyone involved in shaping, delivering or explaining HEIF-funded activity, including colleagues working in research, knowledge exchange, public and community engagement, skills, civic partnerships and institutional strategy.

The toolkit does not advocate for specific activities. Instead, it provides a **conceptual foundation and practical scaffolds** to help institutions articulate:

- what they are prioritising,
- why those choices make sense in their context,
- and how HEIF investment is expected to contribute to economic growth over time.

About the National Coordinating Centre for Public Engagement

The NCCPE advocates for the role of public and community engagement in building a more inclusive higher education sector. Our vision is of an inclusive higher education sector where communities can contribute to, and benefit from, knowledge, teaching and research.

We are focused on mobilising higher education (HE) and knowledge institutions to realise the value of public and community engagement, for long-term change.

We aim to inspire collective action across and beyond the HE system and promote environments and cultures where high-quality and equitable engagement activity is recognised, rewarded, and can flourish.

How to use this toolkit

The toolkit is structured as a journey, moving from context, to interpretation, to practice.

Part A – Making sense of the policy context

Part A steps back from the HEIF guidance itself and situates it within wider changes across research, innovation and skills policy. It explains why HEIF needs to be read differently and introduces a systems-based way of thinking about contribution, growth and engagement.

You do not need to agree with every interpretation here, but this section provides the mental model that underpins the rest of the toolkit.

Part B – Understanding the HEIF logic

Part B looks closely at the HEIF logic model and shows how its apparent simplicity needs to be understood in practice. It explores inputs, mechanisms and impact through a systems lens, highlighting where pathways to growth commonly fail, and how public, community and civic engagement helps strengthen them.

This section provides the conceptual grounding for describing impact credibly and avoiding common pitfalls.

Part C – Writing the Accountability Statement

Part C offers practical guidance on responding to the first three sections of the HEIF Accountability Statement. It includes a small number of structured tools and worked examples designed to support discussion with colleagues and help translate strategy into clear, confident narrative responses.

You do not need to use every tool. They are prompts for thinking, not templates.

Annexes – Evidence and further detail

The annexes provide supporting evidence, references and deeper dives into the analysis that underpins the toolkit, including the [University Commercialisation and Innovation \(UCI\) Evidence Unit's](#) evidence base and relevant policy sources. They are included for reassurance and further reading but are not essential for drafting.

Part A – Making sense of the policy context for change

Why HEIF needs to be read differently

Changes to HEIF and the implications for public and community engagement need to be understood in the context of wider shifts across research, innovation and skills policy.

A simplistic reading of these changes is that a more instrumental view of knowledge exchange is being imposed: one that prioritises economic growth narrowly defined and squeezes out the space for investment in public engagement, civic partnership and longer-term system development.

Our interpretation of the guidance is more nuanced than this. The analysis in this toolkit draws on the same evidence base that underpins the [HEIF guidance 2025 - 2031](#), including the [Evaluation of the Higher Education Innovation Fund \(2008-2020\)](#) and the University Commercialisation and Innovation (UCI) [University Knowledge Exchange for Economic Growth framework](#) both explicitly referenced by Research England in the new guidance. It also aligns closely with reforms to the REF and with the direction of travel in skills policy.

Taken together, these sources point towards a consistent shift in how universities' contributions to growth and societal benefit are understood, and how HEIF is intended to operate.

Interpreting UKRI's new mission

UKRI's mission is now framed as: **Advance knowledge. Improve lives. Drive growth**¹. There is no doubt that economic growth has been elevated as a policy priority. What matters, however, is how this mission is interpreted. One interpretation is to read these elements as a sequence: knowledge is created, then applied, then commercialised. This view underpins what is often described as an **innovation pipeline model**.

A siloed, linear interpretation: the “innovation pipeline”

In this interpretation, the mission is read as three loosely connected stages:

MISSION ELEMENT	HOW IT IS TYPICALLY UNDERSTOOD	WHAT THIS IMPLIES
Advancing knowledge	Curiosity-driven discovery, largely within academia	Knowledge creation is upstream and disconnected from use
Improving lives	Downstream application or “impact”	Engagement happens later, often as dissemination
Driving growth	Commercialisation, IP, spin-outs and licensing	Growth is narrow, company-focused and technology-led

¹ [Our vision – UKRI](#)

This model remains familiar and has not disappeared entirely. However, the evidence base underpinning HEIF is clear that it over-simplifies how innovation and impact actually happen.

What the evidence shows goes wrong with this model

Across innovation and growth research, including UCI's evaluation of HEIF, the same risks appear repeatedly:

- innovations are not taken up, trusted or used
- organisations and people lack skills or absorptive capacity
- public resistance slows or blocks delivery
- benefits concentrate in a small number of places or groups

These are not marginal issues. They explain why otherwise strong research and innovation activity frequently fails to translate into sustained economic or societal benefit.

Recognising these risks allows a much clearer articulation of why public, community and civic engagement matters — not as an add-on, but as a way of strengthening the conditions under which growth can occur.

How public & community engagement addresses known points of failure

This table simplifies how public and community engagement contribute to growth

GROWTH PATHWAY	WHAT CONSTRAINS GROWTH IN PRACTICE	HOW PUBLIC, COMMUNITY & CIVIC ENGAGEMENT CONTRIBUTES
Legitimacy & trust	Public resistance slows or blocks delivery	Builds confidence, trust and social licence
Adoption & uptake	Innovations are not taken up or embedded	Aligns solutions with real needs; improves usability; builds trust
Capability	Organisations and people lack absorptive capacity	Builds skills, learning, readiness and networks
Place & inclusion	Benefits concentrate in few places or groups	Aligns growth with local priorities; widens participation

This framing is descriptive, not normative. It reflects what the evidence tells us about where systems fail, and therefore where HEIF investment can make a difference.

An integrated, systems-based interpretation

Taking this evidence seriously leads to a different way of reading the UKRI mission, that emphasises the vital contribution of engagement, social networks and place-based collaboration.

This interpretation doesn't treat advancing knowledge, improving lives and driving growth as a sequence, but as **mutually reinforcing**, and dependent on how knowledge is adopted, trusted and used across systems.

The table below models this integrated, 'systems' interpretation:

MISSION ELEMENT	HOW IT IS UNDERSTOOD	WHAT THIS IMPLIES
Advancing knowledge	Research expands what is thinkable, doable and valuable	Knowledge shapes futures, not just solutions
Improving lives	People participate in shaping and using knowledge	Engagement happens throughout, not just at the end
Driving growth	Growth emerges when knowledge is embedded in systems	Growth is place-based, relational and cumulative

In this interpretation, attention shifts from outputs to dynamics: adoption and uptake, capability and readiness, legitimacy and trust, and coordination across places and systems.

Public engagement is therefore positioned as **infrastructure**, enabling these dynamics to function.

Why this interpretation is evidence-led, not aspirational

This systems-based reading is strongly supported by the evidence underpinning HEIF itself. The UCI knowledge exchange and growth framework emphasises that:

- the most significant impacts of knowledge exchange are **systemic and cumulative**
- growth emerges through changes in **capability, trust, adoption and place**
- people, skills and participation are **core drivers of growth**, not downstream benefits

In other words, the systems model reflects how impact actually occurs over time. See Annex for more information about UCI's analysis.

Zooming out: HEIF within a wider policy realignment

The systems-based interpretation outlined above is not unique to HEIF. Similar assumptions now underpin reforms to the **Research Excellence Framework (REF)** and the direction of travel in **skills policy**, particularly in the **Post-16 Education and Skills White Paper**. Across these domains, policy is increasingly concerned not just with what universities do, but with *how* their activity contributes to longer-term outcomes across research, innovation, skills and place.

What links these reforms is a shared emphasis on:

- contribution rather than volume of activity
- systems and environments rather than isolated projects
- relationships and participation rather than transactions
- and strategy and rationale rather than comprehensive delivery

Seen in this light, HEIF is best understood not as an outlier or a narrowly instrumental fund, but as part of a **broader realignment** in how public investment in universities is justified, governed and evaluated.

The implications of this realignment can be summarised as four connected shifts. These shifts are not additional requirements; they provide a practical way of making sense of how HEIF, REF and skills policy are now working together. Detailed policy evidence supporting each shift is provided in the annex.

SHIFT	FROM...	TO...
1. How value is understood	Outputs and activity	Contribution over time
2. Where change happens	Silos and projects	Systems and places
3. Who value is created with	Transactions	Relationships and participation
4. Why activity is undertaken	Comprehensive activity lists	Strategic, contextual choices

We explore each shift in turn below.

Shift 1: How value is understood

From outputs and activity → to contribution over time

Across HEIF, REF and skills policy, there is a clear move away from equating value with volume of outputs, activity counts or short-term deliverables. Instead, policy increasingly asks how universities contribute to change over time, whether in knowledge, practice, capability or systems.

- REF reform places greater emphasis on contributions to knowledge and understanding, engagement across the research lifecycle, and the environments & cultures that enable impact.
- Skills policy frames value at the level of the system, focusing on productivity, participation and long-term capability rather than individual interventions.
- HEIF guidance reflects this shift through outcomes-focused accountability and an emphasis on contribution rather than attribution: the most significant impacts of knowledge exchange are **systemic and cumulative, emerging over time**

What this means for HEIF

HEIF Accountability Statements need to explain how activity contributes to change, not simply what is delivered. Contribution pathways matter more than output lists, and engagement plays a crucial role in activating that contribution.

Shift 2: Where change happens

From silos and projects → to systems and places

Policy now consistently recognises that growth and impact do not emerge from isolated projects or interventions, but from interactions across systems — shaped by place, institutions, baseline conditions and coordination, and developing over time.

- UCI evidence emphasises that impact is contingent on context and local innovation ecosystems.
- REF values research environments that contribute positively to the wider research and societal ecosystem.
- Skills policy explicitly adopts a joined-up, place-based approach, linking skills, employment and local growth.

What this means for HEIF

HEIF should be framed as enabling system-level change within places, not as a standalone funding stream. Place, coordination and alignment are legitimate parts of the HEIF narrative.

Shift 3: Who value is created with

From transactions → to relationships and participation

There is growing recognition that value is created through sustained relationships between universities, businesses, public services, communities and individuals — not through one-off exchanges.

- REF explicitly values reciprocal engagement, trust-building and influence across policy and practice.
- Skills policy calls for a new social contract with employers and collaboration across the skills system.
- HEIF evaluation evidence highlights the importance of long-term partnerships, including with public and third-sector organisations and with communities: people, skills and participation are increasingly recognised as core drivers of impact and growth, not downstream benefits

What this means for HEIF

Investment in relationships, partnership capacity and public engagement is not peripheral. It is a core mechanism through which HEIF contributes to growth and societal benefit.

Shift 4: Why activity is undertaken

From comprehensive activity → to strategic, contextual choice

Finally, policy increasingly expects institutions to be selective and strategic, focusing on their distinctive strengths, context and priorities rather than attempting to do everything.

- REF SPRE places strong emphasis on strategy, systems and enabling infrastructure, and on adaptive change that is sensitive to context.
- Skills policy encourages specialisation, collaboration and clear prioritisation.
- HEIF guidance explicitly assesses whether plans are strategically led and aligned with growth priorities and are playing to an institution's distinctive strengths and context.

What this means for HEIF

A strong Accountability Statement explains why particular choices have been made. Strategic rationale now matters more than coverage.

Engagement, accountability and public value

Recent changes to both HEIF and REF reflect a clearer articulation of **public accountability** for research and innovation funding. This is not limited to demonstrating effectiveness or impact but extends to being answerable for how public money is used, whose interests are considered, and how benefits and risks are distributed.

This emphasis is explicit in the REF 2029 definition of engagement (see box), which frames engagement as **purposeful, responsible and context-appropriate**, and as activity that is **accountable to affected communities and funders**. Engagement is therefore positioned not simply as a pathway to impact, but as part of the governance of knowledge itself.

REF 2029 Definition of engagement

For the purposes of the REF, engagement is defined as an interaction between the HEI and relevant individuals, groups, communities, organisations, the public, commercial partners, or policy makers, that is purposeful, responsible, and context appropriate.

Engagement includes, but is not limited to:

- reciprocal flows of knowledge, understanding, or skills including planned or spontaneous relationships that inform research, build trust, influence practice or policy, and/or support public participation
- activities that are accountable to affected communities and funders
- varied disciplinary practices that may directly or indirectly contribute to wider societal, economic, cultural, or environmental benefits (impact)

Engagement practices recognise the value of researchers providing resource, information and guidance to the stakeholders of research, being accountable to both the communities that their research affects and those who fund the research. ([REF 2029 – Engagement and Impact guidance, 4.1](#))

This framing aligns closely with how UK Research and Innovation has articulated its role in recent parliamentary evidence. Giving evidence to the House of Commons Science, Innovation and Technology Committee in February 2026, UKRI's Chief Executive emphasised that accountability to the public is fundamental to how research and innovation funding should be understood:

“We have the privilege, and I believe it is a privilege, to spend £10 billion of taxpayers’ money to get a return for the economy, to improve people’s lives, to drive growth... We are here in service of the public.”

He further underlined that accountability is not simply about reporting activity, but about clarity of responsibility, judgement and purpose:

“Clarity of accountability and delegation is essential... We need to be clear-eyed on our mission and actually focus on delivering those outcomes.”

Taken together, these perspectives reinforce a shared direction of travel across REF and HEIF. Engagement is not positioned as an optional or instrumental activity, but as a means through which universities remain accountable — to the communities their work affects, and to the public who fund it — for how knowledge is developed, applied and justified over time.

Why these shifts matter for the rest of the toolkit

Together, these policy shifts explain why HEIF invites plans that feature engagement, place, skills, partnerships and strategy. They provide the conceptual grounding for:

- **Part B**, which looks at the HEIF logic model and explains why its apparent simplicity needs to be read in a more nuanced, systems-based way; and
- **Part C**, which offers practical guidance on how to respond to the first three Accountability Statement questions with clarity and confidence.

Further evidence supporting each shift — including detailed references to HEIF, REF, skills policy and UCI analysis — is provided as annexes.

Part B – Understanding the HEIF logic: from simplicity to nuance

Breaking down the HEIF Logic Model

Part B takes the core elements of the HEIF logic model (see below) and offers an **interpretive lens** for reading them in practice.



The HEIF logic model is intentionally simple. It identifies three core components:

- **inputs**
- **mechanisms**
- **impact**

Taken at face value, this simplicity can encourage a linear or pipeline-style reading of HEIF. However, as the evidence explored in Part A shows, the underpinning evidence for the model resists this interpretation, and encourages a more nuanced 'systems' view of how universities contribute to impact and growth.

The purpose of this section is therefore not to restate the logic model, but to add **interpretive depth** to it. For each component of the model, we:

- explain what the logic is assuming
- highlight where systems typically fail
- and show how public, community & civic engagement helps make the logic work in practice

In doing so, this section connects the formal HEIF logic model to the realities of adoption, capability, trust, place and inclusion, and prepares the ground for describing impact in ways that are credible, strategic and evidence-led.

Reading the HEIF logic through a public, community & civic engagement lens

Rather than treating the three components of the logic model (inputs, mechanisms and impact) as linear stages, this section reads them as **interdependent elements of a system**. For each component, we ask:

- what the HEIF logic is assuming,
- where the evidence shows things often break down,
- and how public and community engagement helps strengthen the pathway from investment to impact.

The table below summarises this interpretive lens. The sections that follow then unpack each element in more detail.

Table: Public engagement lenses on the HEIF logic model

HEIF LOGIC COMPONENT	HOW IT IS OFTEN READ	PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT LENS	WHAT THIS REFRAMING EMPHASISES
Inputs	Discrete resources or activities (e.g. research, facilities, skills provision)	Inputs as system capabilities	HEIF invests in capabilities (people, knowledge, relationships, infrastructure) that only create value when they are connected, accessible and used
Mechanisms	Broad routes to growth that operate once activity is delivered	Mechanisms as fragile pathways	Growth mechanisms depend on adoption, capability, trust and inclusion — and often fail without intentional engagement
Impact	Outputs, benefits or returns on investment	Impact as systemic contribution	Economic growth emerges through cumulative system change, shaped by behaviour, capacity and social context, and over time

STEP 1. THE FIVE HEIF INPUT AREAS

The HEIF model identifies five broad categories of input that universities and partners bring together through knowledge exchange:

1. Research
2. Education and skills
3. People (staff, students, communities)
4. Facilities, equipment, data and tools
5. Social networks and partnerships

These are not separate funding streams or silos. They are the **raw materials** through which knowledge is created, shared and embedded and **capabilities that cut across the whole system**.



How public engagement activates these inputs

One of the key messages from the policy analysis is that **inputs only contribute to growth if they are taken up, trusted and used**. This is where public engagement plays a distinctive role.

Table: How does Public Engagement help HEIF inputs contribute to growth?

HEIF INPUT	HOW THIS CONTRIBUTES TO GROWTH	HOW PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT HELPS ACTIVATE THIS
Research	Generates ideas, evidence and innovation	Improves ideation through co-creation; adoption by aligning with real needs; builds trust
Education & skills	Builds human capital and productivity	Builds confidence, participation and pathways into opportunity
People (staff, students, communities)	Carry knowledge, creativity and relationships	Strengthens capability, motivation and connection
Facilities, equipment, data & tools	Enable experimentation, collaboration and scaling	Broadens access; supports shared use and uptake
Social networks & partnerships	Enable coordination and system effectiveness	Builds trust, legitimacy and sustained collaboration

As the table illustrates, public engagement helps to:

- align **research** with real needs and contexts, improving adoption and trust
- turn **education and skills** into accessible pathways, building confidence and participation
- strengthen **people-based capabilities** such as motivation, creativity and connection
- broaden access to **facilities, data and tools**, supporting shared use and uptake
- deepen **social networks and partnerships**, enabling coordination and system effectiveness

In other words, public engagement helps **make these inputs work**.

STEP 2. FROM INPUTS TO MECHANISMS

Starting with inputs provides a grounded way of thinking about HEIF. But inputs alone do not generate growth. The next question in the Logic Model is how these inputs are activated in practice.

This is where **mechanisms** matter. Mechanisms describe the processes through which HEIF inputs are expected to translate into outcomes. They are not activities in themselves, but the pathways through which growth is enabled.

The HEIF Logic Model identifies four **mechanisms** through which knowledge exchange is expected to contribute to growth:

1. Strengthening growth drivers and easing bottlenecks to power place and sector competitiveness
2. Commercialising and scaling knowledge and technologies to create new sources of wealth
3. Supporting organisations to innovate, compete and scale for the benefit of the UK
4. Enabling people to participate and engage productively in the economy

These mechanisms describe where HEIF is expected to make a difference. They are intentionally broad, because they need to apply across different places, disciplines and institutional contexts.

Why the mechanisms are fragile

While the mechanisms are sound, the evidence explored in Part A is clear that they **do not operate automatically**. Across innovation and place-based growth research, the same risks appear repeatedly:

- innovations are not taken up, trusted or used
- organisations and people lack skills or absorptive capacity

- public resistance slows or reshapes delivery
- benefits concentrate in a small number of places or groups

These are not failures of intent or effort. They are **known points where systems fail**. Recognising this is essential, because it changes how activity should be designed — and how impact should be understood.

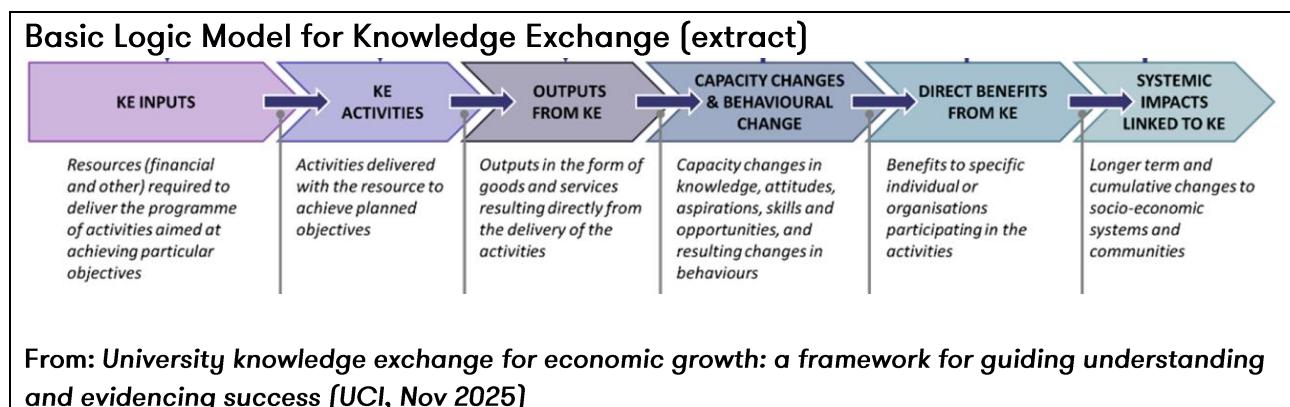
Table: How public engagement strengthens the HEIF mechanisms in practice

HEIF MECHANISM (LOGIC MODEL)	WHAT THIS MECHANISM RELIES ON	COMMON RISK OF FAILURE	PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT PATHWAY THAT MATTERS MOST
1. Strengthening growth drivers and easing bottlenecks to power place and sector competitiveness	Understanding (local) context, constraints and priorities	Growth strategies misalign with place; legitimacy gaps	Legitimacy & trust – engagement surfaces local priorities, builds consent and social licence
2. Commercialising and scaling knowledge and technologies	Adoption by users, markets and publics	Innovations are not taken up, trusted or embedded	Adoption & uptake – users and publics shape relevance, usability and acceptance
3. Supporting organisations to innovate, compete and scale	Organisational readiness and absorptive capacity	Skills, confidence or learning capacity are lacking	Capability – engagement supports learning, skills development and confidence
4. Enabling people to participate and engage productively in the economy	Access to opportunity and inclusive pathways	Benefits concentrate in already-advantaged groups	Place & inclusion – engagement widens participation and connects people to opportunity

Public, community and civic engagement does not sit alongside the HEIF mechanisms; it helps them function. Without attention to adoption, trust, capability and inclusion, the mechanisms described in the logic model frequently underperform or fail.

STEP 3: FROM MECHANISMS TO IMPACT: WHY A SYSTEMS VIEW MATTERS

The HEIF logic model makes a deliberate distinction between **mechanisms** and **impact**. Its shorthand definition of impact is ‘economic growth through competitive sectors, places and organisations’, but the underpinning HEIF Logic Model for KE emphasises that impact should be understood as **longer-term, cumulative change**.



The UCI framework defines the ultimate goal of knowledge exchange as **systemic impacts linked to KE**: longer-term and cumulative change to economic systems and communities. In this model, impact is reflected in whether knowledge becomes embedded in practice, whether capability and confidence increase, whether participation broadens, and whether systems function more effectively over time. These are credible signals that the HEIF mechanisms are working.

Impact as systemic contribution

Thinking about impact in this way requires a shift in perspective. Rather than asking only:

- What outputs did this activity produce?
- What immediate benefits followed?

we are invited to ask:

- Which systems changed, and how?
- How did knowledge become embedded in people, institutions, places and practices?
- How did this strengthen the conditions for long-term growth?

This does not mean abandoning economic growth as a goal. It means recognising that **economic growth emerges through system change**, shaped by behaviour, capacity, trust and social context, and unfolding over time.

How knowledge creates value across systems

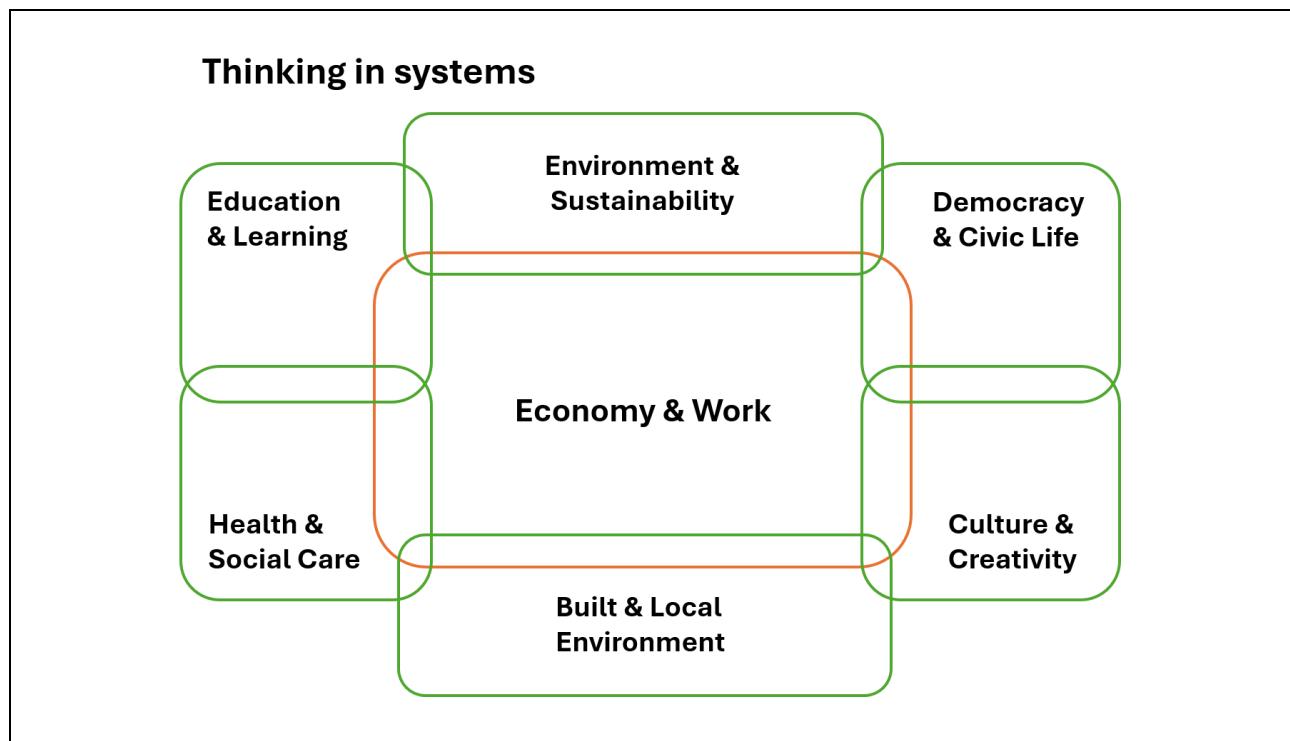
The diagram below attempts to visualise how universities interact with multiple, interconnected social systems. To reflect HEIF's focus on growth, the economy and work sit at the centre — but they are interdependent with wider systems, including:

- education and learning
- health and social care
- the built and local environment
- democracy and civic life
- culture and creativity
- environment and sustainability

Across these systems, impact does not arise from commercialisation alone. It arises when knowledge:

- reshapes practice, services and decision-making
- builds skills, confidence and organisational capability
- strengthens trust, legitimacy and coordination
- becomes embedded in places and institutions

The diagram below provides a way of holding these interactions together: HEIF activity sits within this wider picture: focused on growth, but dependent on how knowledge ripples across systems over time.



For readers who wish to explore this systems perspective in more detail, Annex 3 provides an illustrative mapping of how knowledge exchange can contribute to change across interconnected systems.

Public engagement and systemic impact

Seen through this lens, public engagement is part of how systemic impact is generated. Across the systems shown in the diagram:

- publics help shape relevance and priorities
- users and communities influence uptake and adaptation
- participation builds legitimacy and trust
- engagement supports inclusion and long-term resilience

Public engagement therefore strengthens the conditions under which HEIF investment can translate into sustained growth.

What this means for describing impact

When institutions come to describe impact in their HEIF Accountability Statements, the question shifts from:

What did we deliver?

to:

How did our HEIF-supported activity contribute to longer-term, cumulative change in systems and communities?

This might include evidence of:

- strengthened capability or confidence
- increased adoption or use of knowledge
- improved coordination, trust or legitimacy
- more inclusive or place-based benefits

These are meaningful indicators of systemic impact, even where final economic outcomes will take time to materialise.

Why this matters before turning to the Accountability Statement

Understanding impact in this way helps avoid three pitfalls:

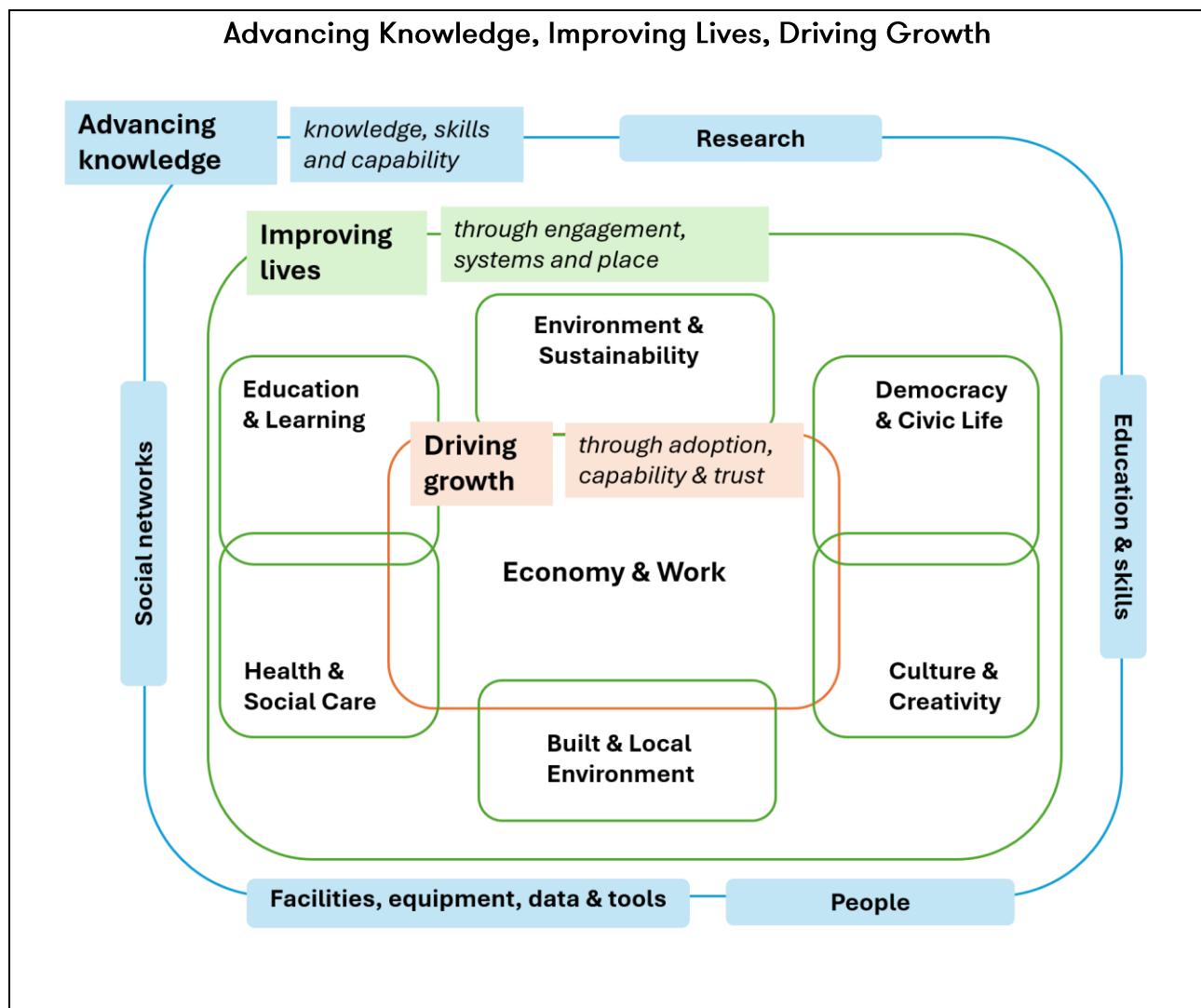
- **treating the guidance as a list of required activities**, rather than a prompt for strategic judgement
- **over-claiming impact that cannot yet be demonstrated**, particularly where outcomes are long-term, shared or systemic

- collapsing “impact” into immediate commercial returns, and missing the system changes on which growth depends

Bringing it all together: how knowledge creates value across systems

The diagram below brings together the ground covered in Parts A and B and provides a framework for interpreting what HEIF is asking for in the context of UKRI’s wider mission: **to advance knowledge, improve lives, and drive growth.**

Rather than reading these elements as a sequence, the diagram shows them as **interdependent**.



- In this framing, **advancing knowledge** represents the capabilities that HEIF activates and connects: research, skills, people, facilities, data and networks. These inputs do not create value on their own. Their value emerges through engagement, participation and use.

- **Improving lives** reflects the way knowledge ripples across interconnected social systems, including education and learning, health and social care, the built and local environment, culture and creativity, democracy and civic life, and environment and sustainability. These systems both shape, and are shaped by, how growth unfolds over time.
- HEIF is explicitly focused on **driving growth**, shown at the centre. But the evidence explored earlier makes clear that growth does not arise in isolation. It depends on how knowledge is taken up, trusted and used, and on the wider social systems through which that knowledge circulates.

Seen together, the diagram reinforces a core message of this toolkit:

- economic growth is best understood as a **systemic outcome**, emerging through cumulative change across knowledge, people, organisations and places.
- Public & community engagement plays a critical role within this picture. It helps align knowledge with real needs, builds trust and legitimacy, strengthens capability, and widens participation — all of which support the conditions under which HEIF investment can contribute to sustained growth.

This way of thinking does not add new requirements. It provides a **conceptual foundation** for making sense of the HEIF guidance and for approaching the Accountability Statement with confidence. With these foundations in place, the toolkit now turns to practical guidance on how to articulate your approach clearly and strategically.

Part C – Writing the HEIF Accountability Statement

This section provides **practical guidance** on how to approach the first three questions of the HEIF Accountability Statement. It builds directly on:

- the policy context set out in **Part A**
- and the interpretation of the HEIF logic model in **Part B**

How to use this section

The HEIF Accountability Statement is not intended to be completed by one individual working alone. In practice, it requires interpretation, discussion and judgement across teams, including colleagues responsible for research, knowledge exchange, public engagement, skills, civic partnerships and institutional strategy.

The purpose of this section is therefore not simply to explain what the Accountability Statement asks for, but to provide a set of **practical tools and scaffolds** that can be used with colleagues to:

- make sense of what the guidance is really inviting institutions to do
- surface distinctive strengths and contextual priorities
- identify where HEIF investment can most effectively strengthen growth pathways
- and translate this thinking into clear, confident narrative responses

The tools that follow are deliberately framed as **conversation starters**, not templates. They are designed to support shared understanding, challenge assumptions, and help teams move from broad ambition to selective, defensible choices.

You do not need to use every tool, nor follow them in a strictly linear way. Institutions may move back and forth between steps, or use particular scaffolds to test and refine thinking. What matters is not completion, but clarity: being able to explain **why** you are focusing where you are, how HEIF investment is expected to make a difference, and **what kind of contribution** this represents in your context.

Making sense of the Accountability Statement template

The diagram below is taken from a recent presentation by the Research England KE team to walk through their expectations of HEIs in relation to the template.

	Section 1 Strategic objective overview	Provide an institutional-level overview that explains how your strategic objectives for knowledge exchange align with your broader institutional mission, goals, or other relevant frameworks.
	Section 2 Equality diversity & inclusion overview	Outline your institution's approach to ensuring knowledge exchange activities and management of these activities are inclusive and not likely to present barriers to participation or disadvantage any groups from participation.
	Section 3 Individual KE strategic objectives, inputs, outcomes and economic growth	For each strategic objective, provide the following: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Strategic objective• Activities• Outcomes• Metrics• Inputs• Outputs• Impacts• Targets
	Section 4 Oversight and governance of HEIF	Institutional policies and procedures for: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Governance and oversight of HEIF• Monitoring progress
	Section 5 Upload finance plan	Complete and upload the Excel financial return template

Their presentation emphasised that a strong Accountability Statement does **not** read like:

- a catalogue of activities
- a comprehensive inventory of interventions

Instead, it reads like a **strategic explanation**:

- of the challenges you are addressing
- the choices you have made in response that most effectively utilises your institutional strengths and specialisations
- and how those choices are expected to strengthen the HEIF mechanisms

We are going to look at the first three sections of the statement, and how to frame the contribution of public, community and civic engagement. The table below summarises key ways in which that contribution might be framed:

Table: Sections 1 to 3 of the HEIF Accountability Statement

ACCOUNTABILITY STATEMENT SECTION	KEY STRATEGIC CHOICES HEIS NEED TO MAKE	WHAT THIS MEANS FOR PUBLIC & COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT
1. Strategic objectives	Which growth dynamics matter most in our context? Where are the main constraints or risks to growth?	PCE helps address constraints linked to adoption, trust, participation and coordination
2. Equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI)	Who currently participates in growth, and who is excluded? Which groups or places are under-served?	PCE widens participation, builds confidence and creates inclusive pathways into skills, innovation and opportunity
3. Activities and outcomes	Where will HEIF investment be concentrated, and at what scale (maintain / targeted / major)?	PCE supports uptake, capability-building, legitimacy and place-based alignment across activities

Section 1: Strategic objectives and approach, what makes you special?

From strengths and context to clear HEIF choices

Section 1 of the Accountability Statement asks institutions to set out their overall HEIF strategy: what they are seeking to achieve through HEIF, why this makes sense in their context & aligns with their broader institutional mission, and how HEIF supports their contribution to economic growth.

This section offers a practical way of developing that clarity. It takes you through a small number of structured reflections, moving from what you have, to where it matters, to what needs attention, and finally to how this comes together as a coherent strategy. In a recent webinar introducing the new guidance, the Research England KE team offered this framing slide:

	Section 1 Strategic objective overview	Provide an institutional-level overview that explains how your strategic objectives for knowledge exchange align with your broader institutional mission, goals, or other relevant frameworks.
What makes you special?		
	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Why do you do what you do?• What are your unique strengths or specialisms?• What are your key drivers, e.g. mission, economic context, institutional history• How are these reflected in your strategic objectives	

The tools below are designed to help you develop — and articulate — the clarity they are expecting in response to these high-level questions. The tools draw directly on the diagram introduced at the end of Part B and the UKRI mission to **advance knowledge, improve lives and drive growth**. It encourages you to think about contribution *within* systems, rather than performance against abstract categories.

This section is structured in three stages:

- Steps 1–3 help you develop strategic clarity, grounded in strengths, context and HEIF mechanisms.
- Step 4 shows how this thinking can be translated into coherent strategy narratives.
- We then offer worked examples to illustrate what strong responses might look like in practice.

Step 1: Start with advancing knowledge, your distinctive inputs

HEIF works by activating and connecting the knowledge assets held within universities. A useful starting point for strategy is therefore to reflect on your **distinctive strengths across the core HEIF inputs**.

Rather than asking “what do we do?”, this step invites you to ask: **Where do we have the most productive and distinctive strengths, and where do we see genuine potential to contribute?**

Consider the five inputs through which HEIF typically operates:

- Research and knowledge
- Education and skills
- People and expertise
- Facilities, infrastructure and assets
- Social, organisational and partnership networks

The aim here is not to be exhaustive. It is to surface **where your contribution is most credible and meaningful**.

Scaffold 1: Advancing knowledge: identifying distinctive strengths across the five HEIF inputs

Purpose: To help teams articulate what they have that is distinctive, productive and worth building strategy around.

HEIF input	Conversation prompts
Research & knowledge	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Where or in what contexts are we recognised for research that is relevant beyond academia?• Where do we already influence policy, practice or decision-making?• What kinds of knowledge do partners actively seek from us?
Education & skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Where do our courses, CPD or training clearly connect to real-world need?• Where do learners progress into sectors or roles linked to growth priorities?• What educational strengths are underused in KE activity?
People & expertise	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Which staff bring deep sectoral, professional or lived expertise?• Where do individuals act as trusted bridges between the university and others?• Where is engagement already embedded in roles or cultures?

Facilities & assets	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Which facilities or assets attract external interest or collaboration? • Where do people come to us to test, explore or experiment or engage? • Which assets are currently under-connected to wider systems?
Networks & relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Where do we have long-standing, trusted partnerships? • Which networks give us reach into systems or communities? • Where are relationships deeper than transactional exchange?

Prompt questions: Where do we genuinely have strengths or assets that could make a difference beyond the university?

Output:

A short list of **distinctive strengths** you want HEIF to build on — not a comprehensive inventory.

Step 2: Situate those strengths in context, where do they play out?

Knowledge does not create value in isolation. Its contribution to growth depends on the **systems in which it is taken up, trusted and used**. The next step is therefore to reflect on context: where your strengths connect to real-world systems and challenges.

Using the systems lens introduced earlier, consider where your institution already has:

- strong relationships or presence
- established practice or emerging hotspots
- clear opportunities to contribute

Scaffold 2: Context and systems - Where do our strengths connect to growth-enabling systems?

System	How this system underpins growth	Exemplar hotspots of practice	Gaps, tensions or un-met needs
Economy & work	Productivity, innovation, firm growth, job creation and quality	• Where do we already influence firms, sectors or labour markets?	• Where is uptake uneven or fragile?
Education & learning	Skills pipelines, workforce adaptability, lifelong learning	• Where do we shape skills pipelines or progression?	• Where does access or progression break down?
Health & social care	Workforce participation, resilience, service productivity	• Where do we contribute to service change or innovation?	• Where are trust, capacity or coordination challenges?
Built & local environment	Place attractiveness, infrastructure, regeneration, connectivity	• Where do we shape place, regeneration or infrastructure?	• Where do communities feel excluded or unheard?
Culture, creativity & civic life	Talent attraction, civic trust, innovation cultures	• Where do we act as a civic or cultural anchor?	• Where is participation narrow or declining?

Environment & sustainability	Long-term economic resilience, transition, risk reduction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Where do we influence environmental practice or behaviour? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Where is change contested or slow?
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Prompt questions:

- In which of these systems do our strengths most naturally align with need or opportunity?
- Where does our place-based context give us particular insight or responsibility?
- Where are we already working well — and where could HEIF help deepen or connect this work?

Output:

A small number of **priority systems or places** where:

- your strengths are most relevant, or
- HEIF investment can most plausibly strengthen the conditions for growth.

Step 3: Sense-check through the HEIF mechanisms, what's working & what's fragile?

Pathways to growth relate to your context.

The HEIF logic model identifies four mechanisms through which growth is enabled. Rather than treating these as requirements, use them as a **diagnostic lens**.

For each mechanism, ask:

- What is already working well in our context?
- Where are there risks, bottlenecks or points of fragility?

Scaffold 3: HEIF growth mechanisms and public engagement pathways

HEIF logic model mechanism	Growth & public engagement pathway	What's working well in our context?	Where are the risks, or points of fragility?
1. Strengthening growth drivers and easing bottlenecks	Legitimacy & trust: Building social licence, alignment and shared understanding across systems and place		
2. Commercialising and scaling knowledge and technologies	Adoption & uptake: Shaping relevance, usability and ethical acceptability so knowledge is taken up and used		
3. Supporting organisations to innovate and compete	Capability: Building skills, confidence and absorptive capacity in organisations and systems		
4. Enabling people to participate and engage productively	Place & inclusion: Widening participation and connecting people to opportunity within place-based systems		

This step is not about highlighting deficiencies. It is about understanding **where HEIF effort will matter most**, and where public engagement may play a critical enabling role

Output:

A clear, HEIF-aligned picture of:

- which **growth pathways** your strategy depends on
- where **public engagement is mission-critical**
- and where HEIF investment should focus to strengthen fragile links to growth

Step 4: From diagnosis to strategic objectives

By this stage, you should have a clear view of:

- your most distinctive strengths across HEIF inputs
- the systems or places where those strengths matter most
- which HEIF mechanisms are most critical, and where they are fragile

The final task is to **articulate a small number of strategic objectives for knowledge exchange** that:

- align with your institutional mission and context
- build on distinctive strengths and specialisms
- respond to real constraints on growth
- and explain how HEIF investment is expected to make a difference

The table below provides a simplified overview of different types of strategic objective that commonly emerge from HEIF-supported activity. Strong strategies explain **why** particular objectives have been chosen, rather than attempting to address all of them. It is intended as a **discussion scaffold**, not a menu to be selected from wholesale. Longer descriptions of each objective are included at the end of this section.

Scaffold 4: Strategic objectives for knowledge exchange

Strategic objective focus	When this objective often makes sense	HEIF mechanisms most engaged
1. Strengthening adoption and uptake of knowledge	Strong research or innovation strengths, but uneven uptake, use or trust beyond early adopters	Commercialising and scaling knowledge; strengthening growth drivers
2. Building organisational capability and absorptive capacity	Growth constrained by skills, confidence or readiness to innovate among partner organisations	Supporting organisations to innovate and compete; enabling participation
3. Enabling inclusive, place-based growth	Strong civic role; growth closely tied to place, participation and local alignment	Strengthening growth drivers; enabling people to participate productively
4. Strengthening legitimacy, trust and social licence	Innovation contested, ethically complex or socially sensitive	Strengthening growth drivers; commercialising and scaling knowledge
5. Selective portfolio approach aligned to strengths	Multiple strengths across systems or places, requiring prioritisation rather than uniform coverage	All mechanisms, applied selectively

Activity: Exploring strategic fit

Purpose:

To help teams identify which strategic objectives for knowledge exchange best reflect their distinctive strengths and context.

Suggested approach:

1. Working in a small group, review the strategic objective overview above.
2. For each objective, ask:
 - o Does this reflect a real constraint or opportunity in our context?
 - o Do we have distinctive strengths that make this a sensible focus for us?
3. Mark each objective as:
 - o **Core priority**
 - o **Secondary priority**
 - o **Not a current focus**
4. Discuss:
 - o Where there is strong agreement
 - o Where views differ, and why
 - o What this tells you about your institutional narrative

Output:

A shared view of one or two **core strategic objectives** for knowledge exchange, with a clear rationale grounded in strengths, context and growth dynamics.

The five objectives in more detail

The section below provides more detailed examples of how different strategic objectives might be articulated in an Accountability Statement. They are included as background reading, to illustrate tone and structure, rather than as models to be copied.

EXEMPLAR STRATEGIC OBJECTIVE 1: STRENGTHENING ADOPTION AND UPTAKE OF KNOWLEDGE

Strategic objective

To improve the adoption, use and embedding of research-based knowledge and innovation, particularly beyond early adopters, in order to accelerate contribution to economic and societal benefit.

Why this makes sense

The institution has strong research and innovation strengths, but evidence suggests that uptake is uneven and often constrained by issues of relevance, trust or usability.

How HEIF contributes

HEIF investment is focused on engagement-led approaches, such as co-design, testbeds and deliberative engagement, that align innovation with real-world needs, build confidence among users and publics, and strengthen adoption pathways.

Relevant HEIF mechanisms

Commercialising and scaling knowledge; supporting organisations to innovate and compete.

EXEMPLAR STRATEGIC OBJECTIVE 2: BUILDING ORGANISATIONAL CAPABILITY AND ABSORPTIVE CAPACITY

Strategic objective

To strengthen the capability of organisations to innovate, adapt and apply knowledge effectively, recognising that skills, confidence and learning capacity are critical constraints on growth.

Why this makes sense

Partner organisations play a central role in local and sectoral growth, but absorptive capacity is uneven and often limits the effectiveness of innovation activity.

How HEIF contributes

HEIF funding supports engagement-led capability building, including co-learning partnerships, applied training and embedded roles that strengthen skills, confidence and readiness to innovate.

Relevant HEIF mechanisms

Supporting organisations to innovate, compete and scale; enabling people to participate productively in the economy.

EXEMPLAR STRATEGIC OBJECTIVE 3: ENABLING INCLUSIVE, PLACE-BASED GROWTH

Strategic objective

To support inclusive, place-based growth by aligning knowledge exchange activity with local priorities and widening participation in innovation and skills pathways.

Why this makes sense

The institution has a strong civic role and operates in a context where growth opportunities are closely tied to participation, trust and local alignment.

How HEIF contributes

HEIF investment prioritises civic and community engagement that connects people to opportunity, surfaces local knowledge, and strengthens coordination across place-based systems.

Relevant HEIF mechanisms

Strengthening growth drivers and easing bottlenecks; enabling people to participate and engage productively.

EXEMPLAR STRATEGIC OBJECTIVE 4: STRENGTHENING LEGITIMACY, TRUST AND SOCIAL LICENCE FOR CHANGE

Strategic objective

To strengthen trust, legitimacy and social licence for innovation in areas where growth is contested, complex or socially sensitive.

Why this makes sense

In some domains, resistance, mistrust or ethical concern slow or reshape innovation, limiting its effectiveness and sustainability.

How HEIF contributes

HEIF supports deliberative and dialogic engagement that enables publics and stakeholders to shape priorities, address concerns and build shared understanding, reducing delay and improving long-term viability.

Relevant HEIF mechanisms

Strengthening growth drivers; commercialising and scaling knowledge.

EXEMPLAR STRATEGIC OBJECTIVE 5: A SELECTIVE, PORTFOLIO APPROACH ALIGNED TO INSTITUTIONAL STRENGTHS

Strategic objective

To adopt a selective portfolio approach to knowledge exchange that reflects the institution's diverse strengths and contexts, while maintaining strategic focus.

Why this makes sense

The institution operates across multiple systems and places, with different constraints on growth requiring different responses.

How HEIF contributes

HEIF investment is targeted where the alignment between strengths, context and need is strongest, with public engagement used strategically to address adoption, capability, trust or inclusion depending on the pathway.

Relevant HEIF mechanisms

All four mechanisms, applied selectively rather than uniformly

Section 2: Equality, Diversity & Inclusion

Public engagement as an inclusion and participation mechanism

What this section of the Accountability Statement requires

Section 2 of the HEIF Accountability Statement asks institutions to explain how equality, diversity and inclusion are addressed in their knowledge exchange (KE) activity and the management of that activity.

How it was framed in the Research England webinar

	Section 2 Equality diversity & inclusion overview	Outline your institution's approach to ensuring knowledge exchange activities and management of these activities are inclusive and not likely to present barriers to participation or disadvantage any groups from participation.
How do you prevent barriers to participation in KE?		<ul style="list-style-type: none">• What is your institutional approach?• How does it relate to KE?• High level, opportunity for activity specific details in Section 3• Assurance for RE that EDI considerations are in place• Collecting sector level information, inform future policy

It is important to be clear about the level of expectation.

Research England is **not** asking institutions to:

- produce new or bespoke EDI strategies specifically for HEIF
- undertake a fresh diagnostic of inequalities in relation to growth
- develop new standalone documentation where appropriate institutional policies already exist

Instead, this section seeks **assurance** that:

- appropriate institutional policies and processes are in place to ensure KE activity is inclusive and does not present unnecessary barriers;
- these policies apply to HEIF-supported activity;
- and institutions can briefly explain what those policies are and how they operate in practice.

If your institution already has an overarching EDI approach that covers research, knowledge exchange and innovation activity, and includes appropriate governance, monitoring and review mechanisms, this is sufficient for the purposes of the Accountability Statement.

In other words, this section is primarily about **assurance and transparency**, not new programme design. If you have EDI arrangements that relate to particular KE work streams these can be detailed in section 3.

What a proportionate response might include

A concise and appropriate response might:

- confirm that institutional EDI policies apply to KE activity, including HEIF;
- explain how KE programmes are designed and delivered in ways that minimise barriers to participation;
- describe relevant governance, monitoring or review processes;
- identify any specific KE-related processes (e.g. accessible funding calls, inclusive partnership practices, transparent selection criteria).

You are not required to provide detailed data or analysis of inequalities in economic growth, nor to demonstrate how HEIF will resolve systemic inequalities. The purpose here is to show that inclusion is embedded in how KE activity is governed and delivered.

Strengthening practice (optional good-practice guidance)

While the Accountability Statement requires only proportionate assurance, many institutions may wish to reflect more deeply on how inclusion strengthens the effectiveness and legitimacy of knowledge exchange.

The wider UKRI policy landscape situates EDI within **Responsible Research and Innovation (RRI)**. Across UKRI guidance, responsibility is framed as a matter of judgement and practice, asking whether activity is anticipatory, reflective, inclusive and responsive.

The well-established **AREA framework** (Anticipate, Reflect, Engage, Act) provides a useful high-level reference point.

For institutions seeking a more applied lens specifically tailored to knowledge exchange, the **Responsible Knowledge Exchange, Engagement and Impact (RKEEI)** framework offers a practical scaffold. Importantly, this is **not required** for the Accountability Statement. It is offered here as optional support for institutions wishing to strengthen their practice over time.

The RKEEI Principles

Principle	What this principle covers in practice
1. Integrity and Ethics	Conducting KEEI activities with integrity, reflexivity and ethical scrutiny.
2. Equity, Inclusion, Diversity and Belonging	Ensuring KEEI activities foster inclusive collaboration and fair distribution of benefits.
3. Reciprocity and Sustainability	Building meaningful, reciprocal and lasting relationships that minimise harm.
4. Contextual Sensitivity and Cultural Respect	Acting with cultural awareness and respect for differing contexts and worldviews.
5. Sharing and Openness	Promoting openness while responsibly managing confidentiality and competing interests.
6. Support and Recognition	Recognising and resourcing KEEI as a core component of research.

Importantly, RKEEI works well at **portfolio level**, making it suitable for HEIF strategies that cut across activities, systems and places.

Scaffold 5: Using RKEEI to reflect on EDI across your HEIF portfolio

RKEEI principle	What to reflect on in HEIF terms	Prompt questions
1. Integrity and Ethics	Whether HEIF-funded KE activity is conducted responsibly, with appropriate ethical scrutiny, integrity in claims, and safeguards for participants/partners.	Where are the ethical sensitivities or risks in our HEIF portfolio (e.g., data, consent, reputational risk, extractive practice)? Are our claims about benefit or growth proportionate and evidence-aware? Do we have appropriate safeguards and ethical oversight where needed?
2. Equity, Inclusion, Diversity and Belonging	Who participates in HEIF-supported activity, who benefits, and whether any groups face barriers to access, influence, recognition or benefit.	Who benefits most from our current HEIF activity? Who is missing or under-represented, and why? Where might our processes (calls, eligibility, timelines, formats, networks) create barriers? How do we ensure people feel included and able to contribute meaningfully?

3. Reciprocity and Sustainability	<p>Whether partnerships are genuinely two-way, fair and non-extractive — and whether HEIF activity supports lasting relationships and benefits rather than “one-off” engagement.</p>	<p>Are partners and communities treated as contributors or recipients? What do they gain, and what do we gain? Are expectations, resourcing and recognition fair? Are we building relationships that last beyond single projects or funding cycles?</p>
4. Contextual Sensitivity and Cultural Respect	<p>How HEIF activity reflects local context, histories, constraints and worldviews — and whether it is appropriate to the communities, sectors or places involved.</p>	<p>How well does our activity reflect place-based needs, constraints and histories? Whose values and assumptions are shaping priorities? Where might “good practice” look different in different contexts? Where does misalignment weaken legitimacy or impact?</p>
5. Sharing and Openness	<p>How decisions, priorities and trade-offs are communicated; how open HEIF activity is (where appropriate); and how confidentiality/trust are handled in partnerships.</p>	<p>Are our choices about focus, scale and beneficiaries clear and defensible? How transparent are our internal decisions and external communications? Where are we open by default — and where is confidentiality justified and negotiated fairly? Do we share learning across the institution and with partners?</p>
6. Support and Recognition	<p>Whether the institution appropriately resources, enables and recognises the people who deliver HEIF-supported KE and engagement (including professional staff and external collaborators).</p>	<p>Do we recognise and support the full range of contributions involved in HEIF activity (professional staff, community partners, technical specialists, ECRs, students)? Do workloads, training, reward and progression reflect the reality of KE work? Where are capacity constraints limiting inclusive practice?</p>

How to use this scaffold

- This scaffold is intended as **optional good-practice reflection**, not a compliance requirement.
- For the Accountability Statement, institutions mainly need to provide **assurance** that inclusive policies/processes exist and apply to KE/HEIF.
- Where helpful, use this scaffold to identify a **small number of practical improvements** to strengthen inclusion across the portfolio.

A final sense-check for Section 2

Before finalising Section 2, ask:

- Who is currently excluded from participation in growth, and why?
- Which barriers are most limiting effectiveness in our context?
- How does public engagement help reduce those barriers?
- Is our ambition proportionate and credible?

If your answer shows **how inclusion strengthens growth**, you are exactly where HEIF expects you to be.

Note also that in section 3 you are expected to identify **EDI considerations** for each strategic objective you include.

Section 3: Activities, outcomes and expected contribution to growth

This section of the Accountability Statement asks institutions to describe **what HEIF funding will be used for, and what difference this activity is expected to make**.

It is important to be clear from the outset that this is **not** a request for exhaustive activity lists or for proof of final economic impact. Research England has been explicit that the purpose of the Accountability Statement is to articulate **credible contribution**, grounded in logic, context and evidence.

	Section 3 Individual KE strategic objectives, inputs, outcomes and economic growth		For each strategic objective, provide the following: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Strategic objective• Activities• Outcomes• Metrics• Inputs• Outputs• Impacts• Targets
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As set out in Research England's briefing on the Accountability Statement, activities such as engagement, cultural and civic activity are fully in scope where they play a meaningful role in enabling growth. They shared a worked example (see below) which confirms how open they are to a diversity of mechanisms and pathways to growth.

Table: Research England Worked Example for Arts Specialist HEI

Section 3 - Individual KE strategic objectives, inputs, outcomes and economic growth Arts specialist university – medium area of activity / strategic importance	
Institutional strategic objective for KE	Create positive societal and industry impact by strengthening the creative economy and fostering innovation in the arts and cultural sector. Collaborate with creative and cultural industries to drive innovation, resilience, and inclusive growth, ensuring the arts remain a catalyst for social and economic development.

KE activities supported by HEIF and expected outputs	<p>Launch a flagship programme to support the resilience of the creative industries, responding to sector-wide challenges and societal shifts.</p> <p>Main initiative: Re:Imagine – a two-day festival and year-round engagement series. This will share best practice, explore emerging models, and reimagine the role of arts in shaping future communities. Partnerships with leading cultural organisations, health and wellbeing networks, and grassroots creative enterprises.</p> <p>HEIF will support 75% of total project budget including the following roles: Programming Producer (0.4 FTE), Evaluation Fellow (0.25 FTE) Project Coordinator (0.5 FTE), project administrator (1 FTE)</p> <p>Year 1: First festival iteration and review; planning for next cycle. Year 2: Second iteration and expanded programming. Year 3: Evaluation and legacy planning; consultation for scaling. Year 4: Third iteration and sector-wide dissemination.</p>
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Intended outcomes and impacts to deliver economic growth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Strengthened community cohesion in underserved regions and through creation of new pathways for creative entrepreneurship. Supporting resilience and innovation in the creative and cultural industries (CCI), the initiative helps sustain and grow a sector that is a major contributor to UK GDP. Festivals and programming attract audiences, generate ticket sales, and stimulate local spending in hospitality, retail, and transport. Cultural and sustainability awareness enhanced with society and the local community
Intended data to monitor progress	<p>National</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> HEBCI (annual) Table 5 data, facilities and equipment, consultancy <p>Local</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Target to engage 800 participants from across creative industries, local government, education, and community sectors over two years. Target to build partnerships with 40 industry collaborators annually. Periodic survey – (2/3 years) partner engagement with university

EDI considerations specific to this objective	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure diverse voices are included in festival programming and year-round engagement (artists, producers, and audiences from underrepresented groups). Establish targets for participation by women, ethnic minorities, disabled creatives, and those from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds. Provide accessible formats (e.g., captioning, BSL interpretation, hybrid events for remote access). • Monitoring - Collect EDI data on participants, partners, and funded roles. Include EDI impact measures in evaluation (e.g., % of underrepresented groups engaged, satisfaction scores).
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[Example for Research England Webinar: Phase 1: New HEIF Policies & Priorities, November 2025](#)

From activity to contribution: the logic Research England is looking for

A strong way to approach this section is to identify a small number of **activity strands** (typically 3–6) and, for each one, articulate a clear contribution chain:

This activity → strengthens this pathway → leading to these outcomes → which matter for growth because...

This keeps the focus on why activities matter in context — and helps avoid three common pitfalls:

- treating the guidance as a list of required activities
- over-claiming impacts that cannot yet be demonstrated
- assuming the only outcomes that “count” are commercial or directly monetisable, rather than the enabling conditions through which sustainable growth is realised

Public engagement is often central to this logic because it strengthens some of the most fragile points in growth pathways, uptake, capability, legitimacy and inclusion.

HEIF as a balanced portfolio

It is important to recognise that HEIF operates as a portfolio fund. Institutions are not expected to demonstrate equal emphasis across all forms of knowledge exchange, nor to show that every activity directly contributes to economic growth in the same way.

Different activities play different roles within a portfolio. Some may support commercialisation or scale, others may strengthen skills, trust, inclusion or place-based alignment. What matters is not uniformity, but intentional balance: being able to explain how your mix of activity reflects your mission, strengths and context.

A strong Accountability Statement therefore does not aim to cover everything. Instead, it explains why particular activities are prioritised, and how together they contribute to strengthening growth pathways over time.

So how might Public and Community Engagement contribute to HEIF activity and outcomes?

A helpful way to tackle this is to consider a small number of **public engagement contribution pathways**, each of which aligns with the HEIF logic model and the mechanisms discussed in Part B.

Pathway focus	HEIF inputs involved	How public engagement operates (mechanism)	Growth-relevant outcomes that can be articulated
1. Adoption & uptake	Research; facilities, data & tools	Engagement with users, publics and intermediaries improves relevance, usability and trust; ethical and social considerations are surfaced early	Increased uptake and application of research and innovation; reduced redesign and non-adoption; stronger foundations for commercialisation and scaling
2. Capability & absorptive capacity	Education & skills; people (staff, students, communities)	Engagement builds skills, confidence, learning and networks among individuals and organisations, strengthening readiness to use knowledge	Improved organisational capability to innovate and apply knowledge; enhanced productivity through more effective use of skills and evidence
3. Legitimacy & trust	Research; social networks & partnerships	Dialogue and deliberation build confidence, trust and social licence for change, particularly in contested or sensitive areas	Reduced resistance and delay; smoother implementation of innovation, policy or service change; more stable conditions for growth investment

4. Place-based alignment & inclusion	Education & skills; people; facilities	Civic and community engagement aligns activity with local priorities, widens participation and connects growth activity to place	Broader participation in growth-related opportunities; benefits distributed more widely across communities and local labour markets
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You do not need to use every pathway. Choose the ones that best explain how your HEIF-supported activity strengthens growth in your context.

Turning activity into credible outcomes

A useful test when drafting Section 3 is to be able to complete the following logic chain clearly and succinctly:

This activity → strengthens this pathway → leading to these outcomes → which matter for growth because...

Aim for outcomes that are **proximate and observable** (changes in behaviour, capability, relationships, confidence, participation), not distant economic endpoints.

Worked examples: what this looks like in practice

The examples below illustrate how this logic can be expressed in Accountability Statement-ready language.

Example 1: Adoption-led activity

Context

Strong research strengths, but uneven uptake beyond early adopters.

Illustrative wording

HEIF funding supports engagement-led activity that involves users and stakeholders in co-creating the pathways through which knowledge generates value. This includes co-design and testbed approaches that help shape relevance and usability, and address ethical or social concerns. These activities are expected to increase uptake and sustained use of research outputs, strengthening adoption pathways and accelerating contribution to growth.

Why this works

Clear link between engagement, adoption and growth contribution without over-claiming impact.

Example 2: Capability-led activity

Context

Partner organisations are critical to growth but have uneven absorptive capacity.

Illustrative wording

HEIF investment supports engagement-led capability building with SMEs and public-sector partners, including co-learning partnerships and applied training. These activities strengthen organisational readiness and confidence to innovate, enabling more effective use of knowledge and improving the long-term impact of HEIF-supported activity.

Why this works

Frames outcomes in terms of capability and readiness, not short-term outputs.

Example 3: Place- and inclusion-led activity

Context

Growth priorities are closely tied to place, participation and trust.

Illustrative wording

HEIF-supported engagement activity focuses on widening participation in innovation and skills initiatives aligned with local priorities. By working with community organisations and local partners, these activities build trust, surface lived experience and connect people to opportunity. This strengthens inclusive growth pathways and supports more sustainable place-based outcomes.

Why this works

Shows how inclusion and engagement contribute directly to growth effectiveness.

Writing impact well: a sense-check

Strong Section 3 responses typically:

- focus on **contribution rather than attribution**
- describe outcomes that are **proximate, observable and credible**
- avoid generic claims about economic impact
- make clear how public engagement strengthens HEIF mechanisms

A useful rule of thumb is:

If an outcome depends on many actors and long timescales, describe your contribution to the conditions that make it more likely — not the final result.

Additional examples of outcome wording are provided in the annex for reference.

Bringing this together

Section 3 works best when it demonstrates a **clear line of reasoning** from strategy to activity to outcome. Institutions do not need to be comprehensive or exhaustive. They do

need to be **intentional, selective and honest** about where HEIF investment is expected to make the greatest difference.

If readers can see how your activities strengthen adoption, capability, trust, inclusion or coordination in ways that matter for growth, you are doing exactly what this section is designed to elicit.

HEIF Accountability Statement: Drafting checklist

We end with a checklist to act as a final sense-check, not a new planning exercise.

Using the checklist

By this point in the toolkit, you should have:

- a clear sense of your **strategic focus**
- an understanding of how HEIF works through **mechanisms, not pipelines**
- **Sensitivity to EDI** and concrete ideas for how to demonstrate how you will address inclusion in your activity
- and a practical approach to framing **activities, outcomes and contribution**

The checklist that follows reflects how Accountability Statements are likely to be read: looking for clarity of purpose, coherence of logic, and confidence that HEIF investment is being used strategically to strengthen growth pathways.

You do not need to tick every box. Instead, use it to ask a simple question: *If someone unfamiliar with our institution read this statement, would they understand what we are prioritising, why it matters, and how HEIF is expected to make a difference?*

Revised HEIF Accountability Statement – Final Sense-Check

Purpose:

This checklist is designed as a *final review tool*, not an additional planning step.

You do not need to tick every box, but you should be comfortable answering each question clearly.

1. Overall coherence and tone

- Does the statement read as a **strategic narrative**, not a list of activities?
- Is it clear **why** we are focusing on what we have chosen to prioritise?
- Are choices explained in relation to **strengths, context and growth dynamics**?
- Does public engagement appear where it strengthens uptake, capability, trust or inclusion, rather than everywhere?

2. Strategic objectives (Question 1)

- Have we identified a **small number of strategic challenges** relevant to our context?
- Are these framed at the level of **HEIF mechanisms** (e.g. adoption, capability, trust, place)?
- Is it clear how HEIF investment is expected to **strengthen these mechanisms**?
- Do objectives focus on **change over time**, not just delivery?

3. Equality, diversity and inclusion (Question 2)

- Have we clearly confirmed that our institutional EDI policies apply to knowledge exchange activity, including HEIF?
- Have we briefly described the relevant policies, processes or governance arrangements that ensure KE activity is inclusive and does not create unnecessary barriers?
- Have we shown how HEIF activity operates within existing institutional EDI frameworks?
- Is our response proportionate, focused on assurance and transparency, and aligned with what the guidance actually asks for?

4. Activities and expected outcomes (Question 3)

- Have we described a **manageable number of activity areas** aligned to our strategy?
- Have we described clear objectives for a manageable number of activity areas?
- Is there a clear line of sight from **challenge** → **activity** → **mechanism** → **outcome**?
- Are outcomes framed as **signals of system change** (e.g. adoption, capability, trust, inclusion)?
- Have we avoided claiming attribution for long-term economic outcomes?

5. Impact language and confidence check

- Are we using **contribution language** (“has contributed to...”, “has supported...”) appropriately?
- Are outcomes described in terms of **what changed**, not just what happened?
- Would an external reader understand how **HEIF funding is making growth pathways work better**?

Final reminder

You are not expected to evidence final economic impact.

You are expected to demonstrate **strategic intent, coherent logic and credible contribution**.

ANNEX 1: UCI and the evidence base underpinning HEIF

Much of the analysis in this toolkit draws on the evidence base that underpins the HEIF guidance itself, particularly work led by the [Policy Evidence Unit for University Commercialisation and Innovation \(UCI\)](#), based at the University of Cambridge.

This annex summarises key findings from the UCI evidence base that directly informed HEIF policy and guidance. It is included to provide reassurance and supporting evidence for the systems-based interpretation used throughout this toolkit.

UCI is Research England's national policy evidence unit for university knowledge exchange. It works in close partnership with Research England to strengthen the data, frameworks and evaluative approaches used to understand how universities contribute to innovation and economic growth. Its work directly informs HEIF policy development and is explicitly referenced in the current HEIF guidance.

Two recent UCI publications are particularly important for understanding the direction of travel:

- the [Evaluation of the Higher Education Innovation Fund \(2008-2020\)](#), which synthesises evidence on how HEIF contributes to growth in practice
- the [University Knowledge Exchange for Economic Growth framework](#), which sets out how universities contribute to growth through knowledge exchange across people, organisations, technologies and places

Together, these studies provide a clear empirical foundation for reading HEIF not as a linear funding pipeline, but as an intervention in complex economic and social systems.

Table: What the UCI evidence tells us about how HEIF works

What the evidence shows	Key insight from UCI	Implication for HEIF
Economic impact from KE is long-term and cumulative	UCI shows that growth effects emerge through sustained changes in systems, not single interventions	HEIF should be understood as building conditions for impact, not delivering immediate outcomes
Linear “research → commercialisation → growth” models are insufficient	UCI identifies multiple layers (people, organisations, technology, systems) shaping outcomes	Pipeline models obscure where and why impact fails

Innovation frequently fails due to non-technical factors	Evidence highlights problems of uptake, skills, trust, resistance and uneven benefit	Engagement, capability-building and inclusion are not optional extras
Place and context matter fundamentally	UCI emphasises baseline conditions, institutions and system coordination	Place-based, relational and participatory approaches are critical
Universities contribute in many ways beyond commercialisation	Education, skills, facilities, networks and people are core KE assets	HEIF inputs cut across missions and functions

The UCI logic model underpinning the HEIF guidance

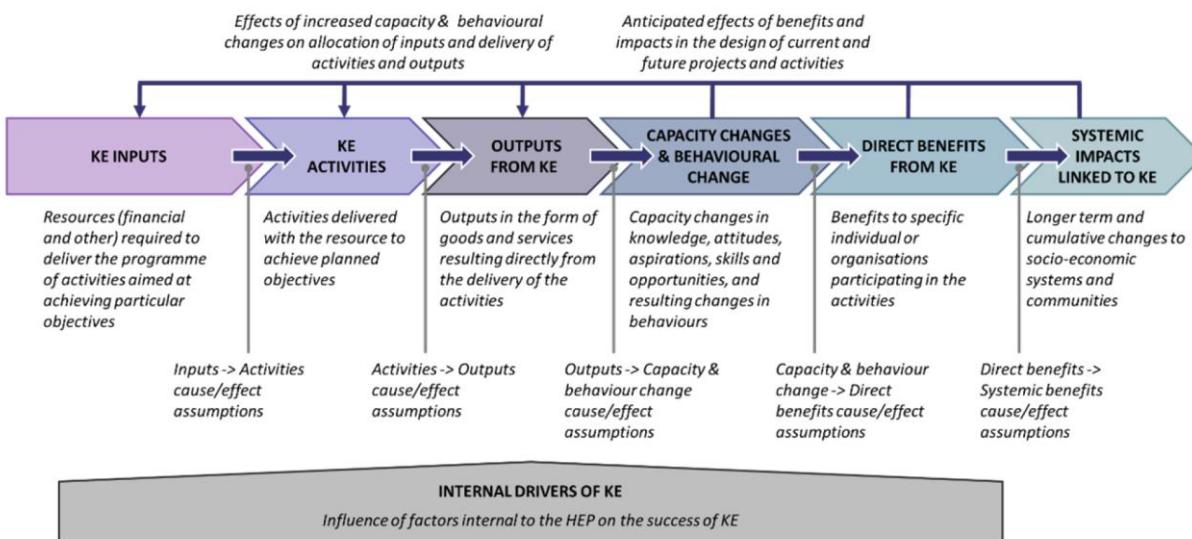
The UCI knowledge exchange logic model (see below) provides a crucial additional insight for interpreting HEIF. As the model shows, the ultimate goal of knowledge exchange is not simply immediate benefits or short-term outputs, but *systemic impacts linked to KE: longer-term and cumulative change to economic systems and communities*. This framing makes explicit that economic growth should be understood as an emergent property of system change, rather than as a direct or immediate outcome of individual projects. Growth arises through successive rounds of capacity-building, behavioural change and learning, which in turn shape how future activities are designed and delivered.

This has important implications for how HEIF impact is framed and evidenced. It legitimises an emphasis on contribution, trajectory and system conditions, and reinforces the importance of mechanisms such as adoption, capability, trust and inclusion. It also explains why public engagement plays a critical role: without attention to how people, organisations and communities respond to and shape innovation, system change — and therefore growth — is unlikely to occur.

UCI Logic Model for Knowledge Exchange

(A) BASIC LOGIC MODEL FOR KNOWLEDGE EXCHANGE

DEMAND SIDE & INSTITUTIONAL DRIVERS FOR KE
Influence of external factors on the success of KE



INTERNAL DRIVERS OF KE
Influence of factors internal to the HEP on the success of KE

From: University knowledge exchange for economic growth: a framework for guiding understanding and evidencing success (Nov 2025)

<https://www.ifm.eng.cam.ac.uk/research/uci-policy-unit/uci-news/ke-growth-framework/>

Table: Key UCI documents underpinning HEIF

Document	Purpose	Core insights	Why this matters for HEIF
<u>Evaluation of the Higher Education Innovation Fund (HEIF) 2008-2020</u>	To assess how HEIF has contributed to knowledge exchange, innovation and growth in practice, drawing on programme-level evidence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • HEIF impact is long-term and cumulative rather than immediate • Benefits emerge through changes in capability, relationships and behaviour • Non-technical factors (uptake, trust, skills, coordination) are critical to success • Place and context strongly shape outcomes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • HEIF should be framed as building conditions for impact, not delivering short-term results • Contribution is a more appropriate framing than attribution • Engagement, skills and partnership activity are integral to effectiveness
<u>University Knowledge Exchange for Economic Growth Framework</u>	To provide a conceptual framework for understanding how universities contribute to economic growth through knowledge exchange	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Growth arises from interactions across people, organisations, technologies and systems • Linear or pipeline models are insufficient to explain impact • Capability, absorptive capacity and trust are key mediators of success • Universities contribute through multiple pathways beyond commercialisation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supports a systems-based interpretation of HEIF • Justifies focus on adoption, capability, legitimacy and place • Reinforces the role of public engagement as enabling system functioning

Together, these documents provide the empirical and conceptual foundation for understanding HEIF as an intervention in complex systems rather than a linear innovation pipeline.

ANNEX 2: Evidence from the relevant policy documents

SHIFT 1: HOW VALUE IS UNDERSTOOD — FROM OUTPUTS TO CONTRIBUTION

Source	Evidence	What this confirms	What this means for HEIF
<u>HEIF policies & priorities 2025-2031</u>	“Key developments include a shift toward outcomes-focused accountability and assurance processes.” (Policy developments and future direction, p.2)	Outcomes and contribution matter more than activity lists	HEIF Accountability Statements should explain plausible contribution pathways
<u>Post-16 Education and Skills White Paper (2025)</u>	“We will create a research ecosystem that drives innovation, supports growth, and keeps the UK at the forefront of global science...” (Ministerial Foreword, p.9)	Value framed at ecosystem level, not output level	HEIF should be framed as contributing to system capability, not just deliverables
<u>Post-16 Education and Skills White Paper (2025)</u>	Universities “must do this as part of a reformed system that... aligns with the needs of the economy.” (Executive Summary, p.11)	Contribution is contextual and relational	HEIF narratives should explain how activity contributes to wider outcomes
<u>REF 2029: Contributions to Knowledge and Understanding (CKU)</u>	REF places increased emphasis on “contributions to knowledge and understanding” rather than volume of outputs (Section 4, paras 4-7)	Explicit move beyond output counting	HEIF language should mirror REF’s contribution framing
<u>REF 2029: Engagement & Impact guidance</u>	REF “explicitly welcomes... narratives expressing research engagement across the lifecycle of research.” (Section 6, para 3.5)	Contribution unfolds over time	HEIF-funded engagement can be upstream, formative and enabling

SHIFT 2: WHERE CHANGE HAPPENS — FROM SILOS TO SYSTEMS

Source	Evidence	What this confirms	What this means for HEIF
<u>HEIF policies & priorities 2025-2031</u>	Research England works with partners “ to ensure that policies and activities are coherent, and joined up. ” (Overview, p.1)	HEIF is part of a wider policy system	HEIF should be positioned as system-enabling, not standalone
<u>UCI: UniKE and Growth Framework (2025)</u>	Contribution is shaped by “ context... baseline conditions... place and sector. ” (Section 2, p.7)	No universal pathway to growth	HEIF strategies should be place-aware and differentiated
<u>HEIF Programme Evaluation (2008-2020)</u>	Impact assessed with reference to “ local innovation ecosystems. ” (Evaluation synthesis, p.18)	Evaluation already assumes systems thinking	Legitimate to explain HEIF impact at ecosystem level
<u>Post-16 Education and Skills White Paper (2025)</u>	“ We will work with employers as part of a joined-up skills system that drives growth...” (Executive Summary, p.9)	Explicit systems framing	HEIF sits inside a joined-up place and skills system
<u>Post-16 Education and Skills White Paper (2025)</u>	Strategic Authorities will “ join up skills, work, health and transport interventions... ” (Chapter 1, p.10)	Growth depends on coordination	HEIF should align with local growth and skills plans
<u>REF 2029: SPRE guidance</u>	REF values environments that “ contribute positively to the wider research ecosystem and society. ” (Section 7, para 5.1.7)	Research excellence is system-dependent	HEIF contributes to the conditions REF now values

SHIFT 3: WHO VALUE IS CREATED WITH — FROM TRANSACTIONS TO RELATIONSHIPS

Source	Evidence	What this confirms	What this means for HEIF
<u>HEIF policies & priorities 2025-2031</u>	HEIF supports work with “ business, charities, and the wider community. ” (Scope of HEIF-funded activity, p.5)	Multi-actor KE is expected	HEIF portfolios should include PE and third-sector engagement
<u>HEIF Programme Evaluation (2008-2020)</u>	Non-monetised benefits arise through collaboration with “ community groups and public sector organisations. ” (Evaluation synthesis, p.22)	Relationships are mechanisms of impact	HEIF should support long-term relationships
<u>Post-16 Education and Skills White Paper (2025)</u>	Calls for a “ new social contract with employers. ” (Executive Summary, p.9)	Growth depends on sustained relationships	HEIF can fund partnership and engagement capacity
<u>Post-16 Education and Skills White Paper (2025)</u>	Delivery depends on collaboration between “ businesses, colleges, universities and the wider skills sector. ” (Ministerial Foreword, p.5)	Multi-actor value creation	HEIF portfolios should include PE
<u>REF 2029: Engagement & Impact guidance</u>	Engagement includes “ reciprocal flows... building trust, influencing practice or policy. ” (Section 6, paras 4.0.3-4.0.4)	Relational mechanisms are legitimate	HEIF investment in trust and legitimacy is defensible

SHIFT 4: WHY ACTIVITY IS UNDERTAKEN — FROM ACTIVITY TO STRATEGY

Source	Evidence	What this confirms	What this means for HEIF
<u>HEIF policies & priorities 2025-2031</u>	Accountability Statements must show “ strategically-led plans that support the government’s economic growth priority.” (Accountability review criteria, p.17)	Strategy > activity	HEIF narratives must explain why choices were made
<u>UCI growth framework</u>	Measurement should focus on “ trajectory and contribution, not final attribution. ” (Section 3, p.14)	Strategy over attribution	HEIF evaluation should track signals of system change
<u>Post-16 Education and Skills White Paper (2025)</u>	Providers should “ focus on their strengths, specialise and collaborate. ” (Chapter 3, p.48)	Policy expects prioritisation	HEIF strategies should be selective
<u>Post-16 Education and Skills White Paper (2025)</u>	Reforms underpinned by “ clear funding principles ” and outcome accountability. (Executive Summary, pp.11-12)	Activity lists insufficient	HEIF statements should articulate rationale
<u>REF 2029: SPRE guidance</u>	The ILS should focus on “ how strategy, systems and enabling infrastructure support the research environment. ” (Section 7, para 6.0.1)	Strategy and systems are assessable	HEIF should be framed as part of institutional strategy

ANNEX 3: A systems-view of impact

This annex provides a more detailed view of how impact from knowledge exchange can be understood as system change. It is intended for readers who wish to explore the underlying logic in more depth, or who are supporting strategic or evaluative discussions. It is not intended as a checklist or a requirement for HEIF reporting.

Table: How knowledge interacts with social systems, and the role of public engagement

System	How research opens new possibilities	How knowledge advances here	How lives are improved	How growth is generated	Role publics play
Education & Learning	Research reframes what counts as learning, skill, intelligence and progression	Knowledge informs curricula, pedagogy, skills design and professional practice	People gain relevant skills, confidence and progression pathways	A more productive, adaptable workforce; stronger absorptive capacity	Learners, communities and employers surface needs, shape relevance and co-create inclusive learning pathways
Health & Care	Research generates new understandings of bodies, wellbeing, care and risk	Knowledge shapes services, technologies, prevention and care pathways	Better health outcomes, access and quality of care	Reduced system costs; healthier participation in work and society	Patients and carers shape priorities, ethics, acceptability and uptake
Economy & Work	Research opens new ways of organising work, value and production	Knowledge translates into innovation, business models, services and processes	Better jobs, conditions and economic security	Firm growth, productivity gains, new and more resilient markets	Users and workers validate, adapt and adopt innovations
Built & Local Environment	Research reimagines how places function, connect and sustain life	Evidence informs local planning, infrastructure, housing and place-based decisions	Improved environments and services	Places that attract investment, talent and activity	Residents align development with lived experience, local priorities and long-term sustainability

Democracy & Civic Life	Research reframes power, participation, justice and accountability	Knowledge supports policy design, governance and decision-making	Greater voice, trust and civic confidence	Stable, legitimate conditions for long-term growth	Citizens deliberate, challenge and legitimise decisions
Culture & Creativity	Research opens new meanings, narratives, identities and aesthetic forms	Knowledge informs creative practice, heritage and cultural production	Belonging, wellbeing and cultural participation	Growth of creative industries, tourism and place identity	Audiences and communities co-create meaning, value and cultural relevance
Environment, Sustainability & Biodiversity	Research redefines relationships between economy, nature and planetary limits	Knowledge informs environmental management, sustainable technologies and nature-based solutions	Healthier environments, reduced risk and improved quality of life	Resilient, sustainable growth within ecological limits; reduced long-term costs	Communities, land users and publics steward ecosystems, shape trade-offs and build legitimacy for transition