NCUB's response to the Public Accounts Committee's call for evidence on investment in research infrastructure

The National Centre for Universities and Business (NCUB) represents a collective voice of leaders across higher education and business and aims to tackle issues of shared national importance. We are an independent, not-for-profit membership organisation that promotes, develops, and supports university–business collaboration across the UK.

NCUB's interest in research infrastructure

Research infrastructure is one of the foundational pillars to the UK's world-class strength in research.[i] It is a national asset that supports researchers – not just from universities and academia, but from industry too – to undertake vital work which they otherwise would not be able to do. The facilities, equipment, resources and services that the UK has at its disposal enables all types of research, from blue-sky through to applied, and is essential to the UK achieving its ambitions set out in the Modern Industrial Strategy. The UK's research infrastructure is also a powerful tool for soft power, bringing researchers from around the world to conduct their work here.[ii]

Shared research infrastructure provides the foundation for some of the strongest examples of knowledge exchange and university-business collaboration. By drawing together these two communities and encouraging co-working, these activities support the UK in its economic and civil agendas.

NCUB positions on challenges with the management of research infrastructure

Given NCUB's interest in research infrastructure our main take on current challenges within the system are outlined as follows:

- Investment in research infrastructure, and the world-class strength of the UK's research sector go hand in hand
- Positive strides have been made towards better aligning investment in research infrastructure with national priorities
- Higher Education facilities and capabilities are an integral part of the national infrastructure offer and must be recognised as such
- The ability of Higher Education to continue playing this foundational role is under threat
- It is essential that UKRI and DSIT understand these vulnerabilities
- In developing this understanding, it is essential that businesses perspectives and needs are heard
- Mechanisms exist for this but could be strengthened.

Investment in research infrastructure and the world-class strength of the UK's research sector go hand in hand. The facilities that the UK chooses to invest in have an important role to play in supporting multidisciplinary research, and should be a reflection of the key sectors and industries that the UK wants to be a leader in.

Positive strides have been made towards better aligning investment in research infrastructure with national priorities. DSIT and UKRI are responsible for the UK's research infrastructure assets, and the National Audit Office (NAO) has recognised that greater alignment between departmental priorities and investment in infrastructure has taken place since it last investigated this area in 2016.[iii] While there is still work to be done, alignment with strategic priorities of the UK Government – and the devolved governments – this is encouraging to see.

Higher Education facilities and capabilities are an integral part of the national infrastructure offer and must be recognised as such. DSIT and UKRI utilise the higher education sector in their research infrastructure portfolio, with universities representing a significant investment in the research infrastructure landscape.[iv] They are vital to providing researchers with the facilities to undertake their work, serving multiple disciplines and helping to underpin the UK's research excellence.

Universities host facilities, collections, data assets, specialist laboratories, and partnerships that enable research at local, national and global scales.[v] Across these scales assets extend well beyond the 750 catalogued examples on InfraPortal. Together they underpin R&D, support commercialisation, and enhance skills development for students and researchers. They range from large, distributed facilities to small, highly specialised equipment, forming a dynamic ecosystem continually upgraded and expanded.

The ability of Higher Education to continue playing this foundational role is under threat. Research England and the NAO have identified there is a sizeable cost to maintaining universities' research infrastructure assets, at a time when the higher education sector is under severe financial strain.

It is essential that UKRI and DSIT understand these vulnerabilities and set out how they are mitigating continued decline in university research infrastructure assets resulting from financial pressures. As the NAO identified, DSIT and UKRI are not technically responsible for the maintenance of university-based research infrastructure, only for the funding of it.[vi] The HE sector is in a situation where tough decisions need to be made, and without a clear understanding of what these decisions might mean for research infrastructure, both DSIT and UKRI could see their strategic aims hampered. It is in their interest for both to deepen their understanding of universities' role in research infrastructure, identify where potential pressures could be building, and consider steps to mitigate any closure of facilities that are crucial to their long-term policy ambitions. This may be best served by a review of all research infrastructure, the condition, and where there is scope for intervention.

In 2023, UKRI published a landscape analysis of the UK's research infrastructure[vii], and stated that a further update would be published in 2025 alongside a "major refresh" of the roadmap programme.[viii] It would be helpful if UKRI can provide an update on when this update will be shared.

In developing this understanding, it is essential that businesses perspectives and needs are taken into account. It is equally vital that UKRI and DSIT involve businesses in their discussions on how to allocate their research infrastructure. Businesses undertake the vast majority of R&D in the UK, which in turn delivers productivity benefits and supports enhanced innovation and increased commercialisation opportunities for UK companies.[ix]

Mechanisms exist for this, but could be strengthened. UKRI's infrastructure advisory committee includes representatives from industry, and those with industry backgrounds.[x] This group represents a useful mechanism for communicating those industry needs to UKRI

when it makes its investments in research infrastructure. It is vital that this group continues to engage industry with sufficient representation, and UKRI ensures that there is an appropriate number of industry observers and committee members.

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[i] Royal Society (2018). *A snapshot of UK research infrastructures*
[ii] Royal Society (2018). *A snapshot of UK research infrastructures*
[iii] National Audit Office (2026). *DSIT's investment in research infrastructure*.
[iv] National Audit Office (2026). *DSIT's investment in research infrastructure*.
[v] Royal Society (2018). *A snapshot of UK research infrastructures*
[vi] National Audit Office (2026). *DSIT's investment in research infrastructure*.
[vii] UKRI (2023). *The UK's research and innovation infrastructure: landscape analysis*
[viii] UKRI (2026). *What is research and innovation infrastructure*
[ix] NCUB (2025). *UK R&D spending falls again – why it matters for our future*
[x] UKRI (2026). *UKRI infrastructure advisory committee*