



Research  
England

Funding Application Guidance

5 December 2022

# Research Capacity Building: Expanding Excellence in England (E3) Fund

## Expression of Interest

## Round Two: AY 2024-29

## Guidance for applicants



Expressions of interest should be emailed to  
Research England by **noon on 24 February 2023**.



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<b>To</b>	PVCR and Heads of Research (or equivalent) at Research England funded higher education providers
<b>Of interest to those responsible for</b>	Senior management, Research, Finance, Heads of Department in higher education providers
<b>Reference</b>	
<b>Publication date</b>	5 December 2023
<b>Enquiries to</b>	Geoff Hill (he/him): <a href="mailto:expandingexcellence@re.ukri.org">expandingexcellence@re.ukri.org</a>

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## Executive Summary

### Purpose

1. This document details policies, objectives, and methods for the allocation of up to £180m to expand excellent research through a second round of the Expanding Excellence in England (E3) fund. This fund is intended to support the strategic growth of excellent research units and departments in Higher Education Providers (HEPs) across England. The document calls for expressions of interest (EOI) at this stage. Shortlisted EOIs will later be invited to submit more developed bids for funding.

### Key Points

2. The Expanding Excellence in England (E3) fund aims to support the strategic growth of excellent research units and departments across England. In order to expand excellence, E3 focusses only on units and departments within Higher Education Providers (HEPs) where:
  - a. they are operating at a limited scale of activity,
  - b. demonstrable research excellence already exists, and
  - c. they do not have the internal resources to support strategic investments.
3. At the EOI stage we also expect units to be able to summarise
  - a. what makes their proposal distinctive,
  - b. the potential for the activities to have local/regional impact,
  - c. how they will deliver on their capacity building, and
  - d. how they will achieve a sustainable footing.
4. This is a competitive scheme and up to £180m is available through the fund to be allocated to successful units over five years (Academic Years (AY) 2024/25, - 2028/29). We are not setting a minimum or maximum threshold for awards. We will only fund bids that demonstrate potential to significantly increase the scale and excellence of research activity within the given department or unit.
5. We expect all bids to propose realistic budgets for the scale of activities planned, taking account of both the wider inflationary environment and the five-year nature of the awards. Awards will be for the five-year period, allowing successful bidders time to scale up activity and build quality.
6. Applicants should note that we expect HEPs to assume greater responsibility for the sustainability of the units towards the end of the E3 funding period. The funding profile sought from Research England should reflect this. Funding will be primarily resource in nature, although bids that make the case for capital funding as part of the proposal will be considered.

7. Successful institutions will be notified of funding 8 months prior to the start of the AY 2025-25.
8. Universities will continue to receive their separate quality-related research (QR) resource allocations and their formula research capital (RCIF) allocations. There will be no relationship between the outcomes of this competition and those funding allocations. Nor will there be a direct relationship between this competition and a future national research assessment exercise. It is the intention of E3, however, to support sustainable improvements in the quality and volume of excellent research at those units and departments awarded funding.
9. The funding will be allocated based on a two-stage assessment process, with gateway criteria at the EOI stage relating to research excellence, 'unit' size, regional opportunity, and the intention to prioritise funding for units within HEPs where capacity for independently funded growth is limited due to institutional budgets. Applicants should be confident that they can demonstrate that they meet these gateway criteria and that they will also be able to meet the broad principles of the full bid stage criteria outlined below.
10. All bids should have strategic backing at the institution level, and Research England will only accept bids made through the office of the Pro-Vice Chancellor (PVC) for Research (or equivalent).
11. We are now calling for expressions of interest to the fund. An independent expert panel will assess the bids, calling on other expertise as required, to make recommendations to the Executive Chair of Research England to proceed to the full bid stage.

### Action Required

12. Expressions of interest should be sent, by email only, to [expandingexcellence@re.ukri.org](mailto:expandingexcellence@re.ukri.org) by noon on 24 February 2023.

### Timeline

Table 1: E3 Round two timeline	
Activity	Date
'Full launch' of E3 round 2	5 December 2022
Expression of Interest deadline	24 February 2023
- Expression of Interest Panel	May 2023
Full Bid Deadline	16 September 2023
- Full Bid Panel	November 2023
Round 2 awards announced	December 2023
Funding commences	August 2024

## Section 1: Introduction

13. The Expanding Excellence in England Fund (E3) was established in 2018. In the first round, £70 million of Research England funding was allocated to 13 units across England, building sustainable research capacity in 'small' and excellent units.
14. The success of the first round and the extent of strong applications previously received, alongside indications from REF 2021 of the continued existence of pockets of research excellence, demonstrate the opportunity for further E3 funding.
15. Up to £180 million of E3 funding will be available in this round of competition (round 2) to support sustainable capacity building in small, excellent units from academic years 2024/25 to 2028/29. Funding for E3 round 2 will be drawn from Research England's recurrent research and capital budgets in the same manner as for E3 round 1.
16. While by no means the only barrier, the nature of funding policy may constrain the ability of universities to grow these 'pockets of excellence', meaning valuable opportunities to enhance research performance and the associated benefits may be lost. The E3 fund will target these missed opportunities by supporting the strategic expansion of excellent research units and departments in HEPs across England.
17. This fund will make an important contribution to enabling the Government's commitment to economic growth across England, develop and diversify the research talent pipeline across England, and build new capacity to deliver excellent research and advance the research and innovation agenda. This funding is particularly aimed at those places and institutions across England that are not typically in receipt of significant levels of research funding that enable the growth of small, promising areas of research excellence.
18. In order to expand excellence, E3 focusses on units and departments where there is demonstrable research excellence already, although at a scale of activity where there is clear evidence that expansion will have an impact both on the national research capability and the local and regional economy, society and environment.
19. In seeking to expand small, excellent research units, E3 aims to create distinctive units. Units that simply seek to replicate more-established units at larger institutions, or that seek to grow by only moving staff around the country, risk being out-competed for staff and funding in the future, jeopardizing long-term sustainability and the likelihood of genuinely expanding the research sector and talent pipeline.

## Section 2: Aims and Objectives of the Fund

20. The aims of the E3 fund are to:

- a. Support the contribution of English universities to our society by pushing the frontiers of human knowledge and delivering transformative economic, environmental, and societal impact.
- b. Fund the strategic and sustainable expansion of research capacity across England's regions. E3 will focus on where distinctive research excellence with the potential for expansion already exists and where those existing disciplinary or interdisciplinary foci can benefit their local or regional setting at an increased scale.
- c. Contribute towards the delivery of government priorities while maintaining the principles of funding excellence wherever it is found and delivering a research environment that reflects the rich diversity of the UK and cultivates future talent.

21. In order to achieve these aims, the E3 fund will:

- a. Build capacity and quality in units where research excellence exists but at a smaller scale with potential for growth.
- b. Diversify the regional spread of research disciplines to support the sustained enhancement of research capacity across England.
- c. Enhance the skills base, build and diversify talent and bring disciplines together to develop new skillsets and "future leaders" in areas of research excellence where there is untapped potential.
- d. Reinforce the contribution of HEPs to their region through strategic local partnerships, focusing on sharing resources and infrastructure and generating local impact, backed by robust institutional leadership.
- e. Encourage institutions to explore novel and/or disruptive approaches to fundamental, applied, or interdisciplinary research and research practices through a risk sharing approach.

## Section 3: Funding and eligibility

### Funding Available

22. Up to £180 million is available for this round of E3 over five years (from academic year 2024/25 to 2028/29) with a resource/capital ratio of up to 2:1 across the fund as a whole. We are not setting a minimum or maximum threshold for awards, but the funding sought should set a realistic budget given the scale of investment required to reach a critical mass that is sustainable in the longer term. We will only fund bids that demonstrate potential to have a significant impact on the scale

and excellence of research activity. In the previous round of E3, set over 3 years of funding, [E3 investments ranged from £0.9 to £8 million](#)<sup>1</sup>.

23. This fund is open to all disciplines, therefore there is no one size fits all approach to expanding capacity and capability. We expect bids to be proportionate, accounting for inflationary pressures, and therefore realistic in terms of their calculated costs. Research England particularly welcome collaborative joint bids from HEPs that offer distinctive opportunities greater than the sum of their parts.
24. Awards will be for the five-year period, allowing successful applicants time to scale up activity and build quality. Funding will be primarily resource in nature (although bids that make the case for capital funding as part of the proposal will be considered). Any funds that remain unallocated at the end of the process will be redistributed across all HEPs through mainstream quality-related research funding allocations.
25. Our aim is to time award announcements so that successful units can commence recruitment processes eight months ahead of the beginning of the funding period (2024/25 academic year). All supported projects can start to draw down funding from August 2024 and receive final funding in July 2029.

### **How Funds can be used**

26. Our definitions for resource and capital follow the standard definitions used in accounting. We expect the use of the funding to be primarily resource in nature (e.g. staffing/studentships/fellowships, software, subscriptions, equipment under £10k, travel, workshops/conferences) although some capital spend will be considered (e.g. infrastructure, equipment over £10k and overheads).
27. The 2:1 resource/capital ratio is a maximum across the fund as a whole, not for individual projects, and therefore acts as guidance to specific proposals. Applicants requesting capital funding will be required to clearly demonstrate why this element is necessary for sustainable research capacity building.
28. Applicants should note that we expect HEPs to assume greater responsibility for the sustainability of the units towards the end of the E3 funding period. The funding profile sought from Research England should reflect this. For example, in the final year (AY 2028/29) funding from E3 could taper as institutional support and research income increases.
29. Where PhD studentships form part of the bid, allocated costs must meet the minimum stipend for UKRI studentships<sup>2</sup>. Research England, however,

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.ukri.org/what-we-offer/what-we-have-funded/research-england/expanding-excellence-in-england-e3/>

<sup>2</sup> [Get a studentship to fund your doctorate – UKRI](https://www.ukri.org/what-we-offer/developing-people-and-skills/find-studentships-and-doctoral-training/get-a-studentship-to-fund-your-doctorate/) - <https://www.ukri.org/what-we-offer/developing-people-and-skills/find-studentships-and-doctoral-training/get-a-studentship-to-fund-your-doctorate/>

encourages higher PhD stipends and Early Career Researcher remuneration to meet the cost of living and to encourage greater socio-economic diversity of applicants. To demonstrate good working practices and positive research cultures, Research England further encourages applicants to demonstrate their commitment to contracts that extend beyond the funding period, particularly for, but not limited to, Early Career Researchers.

### **Eligibility Criteria for applicants**

30. Under the Higher Education and Research Act, (HERA, 2017), eligibility for Research England funding falls within the scope of the Office for Students (OfS) regulatory framework. This framework (as described in S39(3) of HERA) states that only HE providers in the approved fee cap category are eligible for Research England funding.
31. Eligibility for this fund is further defined within the guidance document for both stages of this competition. Notably, at the EOI stage, applicants must demonstrate an understanding of the fund's objectives, the excellence of the research currently undertaken within the unit, the size of the 'unit' as it is now, and the need for sharing risk with further public funding.
32. This is not a project-based research funding grant that is awarded or flows directly to researchers but is instead institutional-level funding for a particular research unit. All applications must come through the Office of the Pro-Vice Chancellor or Research (or equivalent) with an accompanying letter of support from the Pro-Vice Chancellor, including commitment to the sustainability of the unit at the end of the funding period.
33. The letter submitted by the Pro-Vice Chancellor for Research (or equivalent) should outline why the institution has not been able to invest in an area they also consider a strategic priority.

### **Section 4: The assessment process**

34. This section describes the process for assessing EOI and Full Bid stage bids. For information on submitting to the EOI stage, see Section 6.
35. The E3 team is committed to ensuring a fair assessment process. All EOI and Full Bid stage bids will be assessed by an independent E3 Assessment Panel. Prior to assessment by the panel, bids will be checked to ensure:
  - a. The lead provider has met the eligibility criteria described in the guidance.
  - b. The bid contains all the information requested in the guidance.
  - c. The documentation does not raise any queries that need to be addressed before the panel undertakes its assessment.



36. To support the panel in making their assessment, bids will be reviewed by a range of experts within Research England and, where necessary, other partners such as other UKRI council(s).
37. Each institution is permitted to submit up to two individual applications and be a lead on one joint application. An institution can be part of multiple joint bids.
38. If an institution submits more than one application, a letter of support from the PVC (or equivalent) will need to detail which application is considered their priority. This will support the panel when considering the financial and administrative support that will be available from the institution during and beyond the five-year funding period.
39. All EOI stage editable templates and accompanying guidance are available to view as PDFs, for the purpose of planning, on the E3 page of the UKRI Funding Finder. Similar documents relevant to the Full Bid stage will be provided at a later date.

### **Assessment Panel**

40. An independent expert panel is being openly recruited to undertake the assessment process. Professor Mary Stuart has been appointed to chair this panel. Panel information and terms of reference of the panel may be found at Annex A. The panel will make recommendations initially on progression to the Full Bid stage and subsequently on final funding allocations to the Research England Executive Chair, supported by additional experts as needed.
41. At each stage, the assessment panel will consider the relative strengths of each bid against the relevant assessment criteria (see Section 5) and ensure the requirements of the fund have been met by the projects they recommend for funding. The assessment panel will also pay due regard to the relative capacity and experience available for bid writing within the HEPs that submit applications in order to support a level playing field across the sector.

### **EOI panel assessment**

42. The assessment panel will apply the EOI assessment criteria (see Section 5, table 2) to all EOI bids and will recommend a shortlist to proceed to full stage bid development, considering the number of EOI bids received and the funds available. EOI bids judged by the panel not to present a strong case for funding and/or do not meet the requirements of E3 will be rejected at this stage.

### **Full bid panel assessment**

43. Following the panel meeting at EOI stage, shortlisted projects will be invited to submit full stage bids, building on the EOI criteria. More information will be provided about this stage in future documents, a high-level view of the

assessment criteria is provided in Section 5 (Table 3) to aid applicants at this EOI stage.

## Section 5: Assessment Criteria

44. At each stage, the assessment panel will judge the relative strengths of each bid against the assessment criteria below:
- a. for the EOI assessment criteria, see table 2
  - b. for a high-level view of the full bid stage assessment criteria, see table 3. More details of how these criteria will be assessed will be provided in the full bid stage guidance documents.
45. Further information on each of the assessment criteria is provided below.
46. Owing to E3 funding being available to the full range of research disciplines, existing in different parts of the country and within varied institutions, there is no one size fits all for evidencing ‘the size and excellence’ of the current unit. These factors are to be self-defined and will be assessed on the strength of the argument presented.

<b>Table 2: EOI assessment criteria</b>	
<b>A</b>	<b>Size and Excellence</b>
Demonstrate that the submitted unit: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• can build upon existing research excellence.</li> <li>• is currently operating at a small scale in contrast to national comparisons. Exceptional cases may be made using international comparisons where this is pertinent to the nature of the unit.</li> </ul>	
<b>B</b>	<b>Distinctiveness and Opportunity</b>
Demonstrate that the capacity building programme will: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• make a distinctive contribution to the UK research base and broaden the regional spread of research excellence.</li> <li>• support the region where the unit is located, in leveraging nationally/internationally competitive research and innovation strengths to drive greater local economic, environmental and/or social benefits.</li> </ul>	
<b>C</b>	<b>Planning</b>
The submission will establish: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• the extent to which the proposed activity matches the objectives of the E3 programme</li> <li>• it can be achieved within the funding period and budget outlined.</li> </ul>	
<b>D</b>	<b>Sustainability</b>
The submission will establish: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• the extent to which both the unit and host institution(s) have accounted for the long-term sustainability of the expanding unit.</li> </ul>	

<b>Table 3: Full Bid Criteria</b>	
<b>A</b>	<b>Planning</b>
A credible and detailed plan for expanding research excellence in a sustainable way, including robust project management, governance, milestone and KPI proposals.	
<b>B</b>	<b>Strategic Commitments</b>
Strategic long-term commitment from the institutional leadership to the expansion, including commitment to local or regional partnerships (including collaborative bids with other local HEPs) and internal financial resources commensurate with the provider and regional setting.	
<b>C</b>	<b>Developing Research Talent</b>
Practice and principles for recruitment, career development and diversification of staff, including but not limited to early career researchers, technical and professional services. Applicants will be expected to set out how they will create or improve upon an inclusive research culture that promotes a diversity of experience.	
<b>D</b>	<b>Alignment with Local, Regional and National Priorities</b>
The extent to which the proposal is focussed on the host institution(s) local and regional context, including but not limited to delivering economic growth, and advances national research and innovation agendas.	

## Section 6: How to Apply to the EOI

47. Higher Education Providers wishing to apply should read the guidance and complete the template at Annex B and then forward this by email to [expandingexcellence@re.ukri.org](mailto:expandingexcellence@re.ukri.org) by noon on **24 February 2023**. Emailed EOI submissions should include the following documents:
- a. A completed Annex B EOI Template (for each proposed project)
  - b. A letter of institutional support signed by the PVCR or equivalent of the host institution(s).
48. Proposals should take the form of a single PDF document covering the submission and any evidence to support the case. This should include a supporting letter of no more than 1-side of A4 from your Pro-Vice Chancellor of Research (or equivalent) and any HEP collaborative partner in the case of a bid from several institutions. If your institution is submitting more than one bid, the PVCR supporting letter should include a clear narrative as to why this is the case and the priority order of bids from the institution's perspective.
49. Proposals should be predominately text-based. You should use Arial font and text should be no smaller than font size 10. The EOI application should be maximum of five A4 pages (not including the front cover page or letters of support), and the total size of the document should be no greater than 1MB. Please do not alter the page margins.

50. Shortlisted HEPs will be invited to submit full bids in May 2023 for submission on 16 September 2023.

## **Section 7: Monitoring post-award**

51. Research England will monitor the progress of funded E3 projects. Institutions will be expected to provide information on the progress of their expansion in the unit or department awarded funding. At full bid stage, proposals will identify a key set of indicators against which performance will be measured. These will need to measure improvements in both research capacity and quality in line with the overall objectives of the E3 fund and the specific objectives of each individual project. Research England will work with the programme board to develop further guidance on monitoring and evaluation, which will be shared with shortlisted bidders on invitation to submit a full bid.
52. By applying at either the expression of interest or full bid stage, institutions agree that any information relating to their bid (both successful and unsuccessful bids) may be used in future evaluation exercises.
53. Successful institutions may be audited by Research England, or an organisation commissioned by Research England, at any stage, to ensure funds are being used in accordance with the terms and conditions of grant. Each host institution will also be required to submit a final evaluative report at the end of the funding period.

## **List of Abbreviations**

- AY – Academic Year
- E3 – Expanding Excellence in England
- EOI – Expression of Interest
- FY – Financial Year
- HEP – Higher Education Provider
- HERA – Higher Education and Research Act
- OfS – Office for Students
- PDF – Printable Document Format
- PhD – Doctor of Philosophy
- PVC – Pro-Vice Chancellor
- R&D – Research and Development
- REF – Research Excellence Framework
- UKRI – United Kingdom Research and Innovation
- UOA – Unit of Assessment

## **ANNEX A: E3 Assessment Panel Membership and Terms of Reference**

### **Membership**

**Chair:** Prof Mary Stuart

**Panel:** TBC

### **Terms of reference**

1. The expert panel will make recommendations to the Research England Executive Chair on:
  - a) Bids to be supported in the first round of the competition.
  - b) Bids to be supported in any future rounds of the competition.
  - c) Any terms and conditions to be attached to specific projects.
2. The expert panel will provide advice to the Research England Executive Chair on:
  - a) The overall conduct of the competition for the Expanding Excellence in England (E3) Fund.
  - b) The approach to be taken to monitoring and evaluation to provide evidence that the funding has delivered the objectives of E3 and to support any case for future rounds of the competition.
  - c) Changes to be made to the fund's guidance and criteria, drawing on the experience of this round of funding, to deliver fully the Government's and Research England's policy priorities and the objectives of the fund should future rounds of the competition be taken forward.
  - d) The appropriateness of processes for due diligence and confirming awards (such as requesting additional information or setting project-specific terms and conditions).
  - e) Any other comments on the successes or challenges of the fund and the influence on overall directions in research policy in the long term.

## **Annex B - Expanding Excellence in England Fund: 2024-28 Expression of Interest Template *(available as separate download)***

Please complete this template and submit it to [expandingexcellence@re.ukri.org](mailto:expandingexcellence@re.ukri.org) by **noon on 24 February 2023**. Documents must be submitted as follows:

- a. Proposals should take the form of a single PDF document covering the submission and any evidence to support the case. This should include a supporting letter of no more than 1-side of A4 from your Pro-Vice Chancellor of Research (or equivalent) and any HEP collaborative partner in the case of a bid from several institutions. If your institution is submitting more than one bid, the PVCR supporting letter should include a clear narrative as to why this is the case and the priority order of bids from the institution's perspective.
- b. Proposals should be predominately text-based. You should use Arial font and text should be no smaller than font size 10. At this stage, the application should be maximum of five A4 pages (not including this page or letters of support), and the total size of the document should be no greater than 1MB. Please do not alter the page margins.

Please refer to the notes contained within this template (these are meant as guidance only) as well as the eligibility criteria for assessing expressions of interest as outlined in the EoI guidance document.

<b>Institution leading the proposal:</b>
<b>Host Department/Faculty:</b>
<b>Subject/discipline area(s)/REF Unit of assessment (UOA):</b>
<b>Total Expanding Excellence in England (E3) funding requested (£m - over five years):</b>  Please provide a breakdown of:  Total resource (£m):  Total capital (£m) (if required):
<b>Contact Details</b>  Title and full name:  Post:  Address for correspondence:  Phone:  Email:

**Partner HEP(s) and department(s) (where applicable):**

**Section 1: Scale and Excellence**

Demonstrate that the submitted unit:

- is currently operating at a small scale in contrast to national comparisons. Exceptional cases may be made using international comparisons where this is pertinent to the nature of the unit.
- can build upon existing research excellence.

Size and nature of unit

- *Provide an outline of your unit, its size and how it can be regarded as 'small' within the context of the discipline.*
- *Please discuss any existing plans for expansion regarding staff numbers and their position (Post-Doc, PhD, Technician, Lecturer etc.)*
- *Please give a brief overview of your existing activity and your main sources of funding.*

Research Excellence

- *Demonstrate how your current research output may be regarded as excellent within the context of the discipline.*

## Section 2: Distinctiveness and Opportunity

Demonstrate that the capacity building programme will

- make a distinctive contribution to the UK research base and broaden the regional spread of research excellence.
- leverage nationally/internationally competitive research and innovation strengths to drive greater local economic, environmental and/or social benefits

### Distinctiveness:

- *Describe the nature of the research that you undertake and/or plan to undertake.*
- *Please explain what makes this proposal distinctive and why the opportunity for expansion would make a unique contribution to the English research base.*

### Local/Regional Opportunity

- *Discuss how expanding capacity provides opportunities in the local / regional setting and/or leverages strengths unique to the local / regional setting. Why is it important to invest in research capacity here?*
- *Outline any potential collaborations that form part of this proposal, or partnerships you expect to develop over the period of funding.*
- *Describe the role of any partner HEPs (and relevant departments) mentioned in your bid and how this collaboration represents a unique opportunity (include letters of support from partner institutions). If this is a joint/collaborative bid with other HEP, clearly describe what role each HEP would play and how funds would be spent across the collaboration.*



**Section 3: Indicative funding request and use of funds**

Approximately £180 million in funding is available over five years (AY 2024/25 to 2028/29) with a maximum resource/capital ratio of 2:1 across the fund as a whole (we expect the majority of funding to be resource). We are not setting a minimum or maximum threshold for awards, in the first round, the budget of successful applications varied between £0.9M to £8M, but over 3 years not 5.

Academic year of funding	Amount and type of funding (£m)		Details (summary list of what funds will be spent on)	Total amount in year (£m)
	Resource	Capital		
2024/25				
2025/26				
2026/27				
2027/28				
2028/29				
<b>Totals (resource/capital) (£m)</b>			<b>Total funding request across 5 years (£m)</b>	

#### **Section 4: Planning**

The submission will establish

- the extent to which the proposed activity matches the objectives of the E3 programme
- it can be achieved within the funding period and proposed budget.

- *State the key objectives of your expansion plans and explain how these align with the objectives of the fund.*
- *Clearly describe how you would spend these funds requested in Section 3 and how these align with your plans for expansion. Please give an indicative timetable of how you would spend the funds across the three academic years.*

## **Section 5: Sustainability**

The submission will establish:

- the extent to which both the unit and host institution(s) have accounted for the long-term sustainability of the expanding unit.
- 
- *Highlight the key paths to sustain the growth in capacity funded via E3 over the short, medium and long term*
  - *What level of institutional financial and other support is there for this proposal during and after the funding period?*