Strategic Institutional Research Funding

Impact Evaluation

Final Report

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Foreword

The English research and innovation system is characterised by world-class institutions and dynamic collaborative networks. This is a challenging time for the sector, however, due to ongoing financial pressures and a range of other contextual elements. An increasingly complex landscape across the HE sector in England makes this report particularly timely.

Research England (RE) is responsible for the allocation of Strategic Institutional Research Funding (SIRF) to English institutions SIRF is comprised of a number of formula-based funding streams, with the largest being mainstream quality-related research (QR); the total SIRF budgetary allocation for 2024/25 was £2.3 billion. By its very nature as flexible, non-hypothecated funding, SIRF is designed to empower institutions to be autonomous. This helps institutions respond to their own strategic priorities, emerging national and global research opportunities, and deliver longer-term ambitions.

Evaluating the impact of SIRF presents a unique set of challenges. There have been several previous attempts to understand the impact of non-hypothecated flexible funding and specifically QR, but the important activities that benefit from SIRF are often hidden or go unrecognised and are difficult to attribute. This makes an evaluation such as this one particularly difficult from a methodological perspective, and the report which follows gives us a new way to understand these challenges. This report also-builds on and contributes to the evidence gathering RE undertakes to understand and evaluate the impact of SIRF. Attempting to isolate the role of SIRF from other funding streams is not straightforward, but this reflects a highly integrated dual support system where formula funding and competitive funding co-exist. Capturing the full breadth of SIRF's influence across a diverse HE sector, when there are no predefined outcomes demands a nuanced and thoughtful approach.

In commissioning this evaluation, Research England sought not only to understand how SIRF is used, but to build a stronger evidence base for future policy development, funding decisions, and strategic planning.

The evaluation was supported by an independent advisory group whose members I would like to thank for their invaluable guidance, expertise and advice throughout this process, especially to Molly Morgan Jones as Vice Chair, alongside the RE team. My thanks are also extended to Fortia Insight (previously RSM) and RAND Europe for undertaking this complex and important task. The work has highlighted for me the diversity of the landscape of institutions, and the importance of having in SIRF a mechanism that provides the combination of flexibility in use and consistency of funding to support the sector effectively.

This report provides an analysis of how SIRF contributes to the strength and sustainability of the UK's research ecosystem. It is important to note that this evidence was collected at a specific point in time, drawing on consultation with 25 institutions and based on a robust Theory of Change. The report consolidates and strengthens the evidence which can support RE in demonstrating both the importance of this funding, and the flexibility it offers, in the years ahead.

The evaluation highlights how SIRF:

- enables institutions to pursue their distinctive strategic priorities, such as investment in infrastructure, interdisciplinary research, and emerging fields
- supports research excellence by funding the people, teams, environments, and culture needed to produce high-quality outputs and impact

- is fundamental to research sustainability by bridging funding gaps and underpinning long-term institutional capability
- acts as a catalyst for further investment, helping institutions attract co-funding to build ambitious research programmes
- strengthens the sector by supporting partnerships, fostering innovation, and driving positive changes in research culture

The findings of this evaluation reaffirm that SIRF is much more than a financial mechanism; it is a cornerstone of the UK's research landscape. Its flexibility and stability allow institutions to plan with confidence, invest in high-risk ideas, and build capacity for future challenges. In a time of growing financial pressures, SIRF remains essential for sustaining the ambition, excellence, and diversity that define our national research system.

We hope this report will inform ongoing dialogue about the role of strategic institutional research funding in shaping the future of UK research and support the continued evolution of policy that enables institutions to thrive.



Professor Dame Diane Coyle

Authors and contributors

This report is the result of an independent evaluation led by Fortia Insight (previously RSM) with support of RAND Europe. The Fortia Insight team comprises of Kristine Farla, Adekunle Adekunbi, Samarth Padaliya, Jenny Irwin, and Matt Rooke.

RAND Europe developed the Theory of Change (ToC) for SIRF. The material related to the ToC has been reviewed through RAND's Quality Assurance process and has also been reviewed by Fortia Insight. The RAND Europe team includes Shaun Leamon, Teodora Chis, Charlie Coyte, Ishita Puri, and Imogen Wade.

Research England has supported the evaluation team, throughout the familiarisation phase of the study, particularly in liaising with institutions, and through providing helpful guidance around the presentation of evidence.

The impact evaluation has been supported by an independent Advisory Group of experts in policy, evaluation methodologies and academics from across the higher education and research and innovation landscape. We thank the Advisory Group for the expert interaction and input which has been invaluable in shaping the report.

We appreciate the time and contributions made by institutional representatives that have participated in the evaluation. We acknowledge the significant financial pressures the sector currently facing, as well as the competing priorities that institutions must navigate. Your thoughtful engagement, despite these challenges, has been invaluable in shaping the findings of this report.

Executive summary

Aims

In 2024, Research England (RE) commissioned Fortia Insight (previously RSM) and RAND Europe to undertake an impact evaluation of RE's Strategic Institutional Research Funding (SIRF).[1] The purpose of the evaluation is to:

- support the development of Research England's capabilities in the evaluation of SIRF and wider research funding
- generate insights that support current and future SIRF policy decisions
- produce findings to inform future government spending reviews
- produce evidence to support the development of research funding policy
- help improve the long-term sustainable management of SIRF

This report provides an analysis of the impact and effectiveness of RE's formula-driven research funding, allocated as SIRF.

Drawing on insights from a representative sample of SIRF recipients, the evaluation explores the strategic approaches and uses of SIRF taken by English institutions. As part of the evaluation, a Theory of Change was developed and tested to gather insights on how SIRF operates and is used across the scale and diversity of institutions.

Introduction and background

UK institutions receive public funding for research and innovation (R&I) through a combination of project-specific grants and strategic institutional funding. These two mechanisms work in complement, forming the dual support system. In England, RE as part of UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) is responsible for the distribution of SIRF through two broad funding mechanisms: block grant flexible funding and ring-fenced allocations.

The total SIRF budgetary allocation for 2024/25 was ~£2.3 billion, which predominantly comprised quality-related research (QR) funding, the main formula-driven block grant for research funding element for research. Mainstream QR accounts for most of the total QR funding allocation, and together with the ring-fenced funds forms SIRF.

SIRF plays a key role in enabling research excellence and sustainability. It contributes to a healthy research sector and helps address strategic priorities in collaboration with other funding sources.

In 2023, RE launched the SIRF Review to assess its formula-driven research funding. The SIRF Review explores the effectiveness, impact and allocation mechanisms, and transparent uses of SIRF against how it currently delivers on its aims and objectives. This report forms a part of the broader SIRF Review, contributing to the evidence base required to inform and influence future research funding policy. The findings of this report will work in concert with ongoing and future workstreams to better understand uses of SIRF, informing and supporting any changes to improve overall effectiveness and impact.

[1] SIRF is inclusive of the funding streams: mainstream QR, QR Charity Support Element, QR Business Research Element, QR Research Degree Programme supervision fund, QR National Research Galleries, Research Capital Infrastructure Funding, Specialist Provider Element and ring-fenced funds: Policy Support Fund, Participatory Research Fund and Enhancing Research Culture fund.

The UK's R&I landscape continues to evolve, with institutions playing a pivotal role through their teaching, research, and knowledge exchange activities. Institutions across England vary in size, mission and research capability, and this diversity shapes how they deploy SIRF to underpin institutional, local and national priorities and research activities. The sector is however, under increasing financial pressures, which may compel institutions to make difficult decisions on investment in research related activities. The availability and constraints of other funding sources, including government, business, charity and international, influence institutions strategic use of SIRF. The findings of this report will contribute to the evidence base, helping demonstrate SIRF's role in sustaining a resilient, diverse and globally competitive R&I system capable of delivering long term impact and economic growth.

Methodology and Theory of Change for SIRF

This evaluation employed a Realist Evaluation design. This approach considers 1) what has happened, 2) why, 3) for whom, and 4) under what circumstances. This approach was chosen as it is in line with HM Treasury's Magenta Book and focuses on the context and mechanisms through which SIRF adds value. As part of the Realist Evaluation approach, Context, Mechanism Outcome (i.e. CMO) statements were developed to set out likely impact pathways through which SIRF adds value. Evidence was collected through interviews with a sample of 25 institutions and tested against these statements

A hypothetical Theory of Change (ToC) for SIRF was co-created through desk reviews, workshops, and evidence scans and this was updated based on interviews with institutions. The ToC is presented in Section 2.3 of this report.

This report recognises the challenges of undertaking an impact evaluation on non-hypothecated flexible funding, and acknowledges previous studies undertaken to understand the uses and value of SIRF.

Evidence of impact

This evaluation underscores the importance of the flexible nature of SIRF in accommodating the distinct needs and contexts of the diversity of institutions across the English sector and contributing to a dynamic national research ecosystem. SIRF does so by:

Addressing strategic priorities: The **flexibility** of SIRF allows institutions to **align funding with their institutional priorities** and to local, national and global priorities. This includes investing in infrastructure, supporting research career development, staff retention and recruitment, fostering interdisciplinary research and seed-funding new research areas. This flexibility enables institutions to respond dynamically to new research opportunities and invest in long-term strategic goals. This is essential for fostering innovation and maintaining the UK's leadership in global research.

Enabling research excellence: SIRF supports the development of **research capability** and **capacity** by funding the research infrastructure, environment, and culture required to enable high quality research outputs and impact. Institutional activities such as fellowships, PhD support, training, developing specialised teams, upgrading equipment and supporting continuation of research activities to ensure longevity of research projects are key to enabling research excellence. Institutional investment of SIRF in expertise, through researchers to technical professional staff and research managers, **builds worldclass people and teams thereby producing excellent research**. It also enables institutions to invest in high-risk, high-reward research projects and emerging interdisciplinary areas.

Contributing towards research sustainability: SIRF provides institutions with stable, flexible funding that underpins research activities from maintaining core research environments and infrastructure, to supporting people, skills, and culture, and enabling the pursuit of ambitious research strategies.

- SIRF bridges funding gaps and supports the full economic costs of research, SIRF enables institutions to sustain and grow their research capacity. SIRF is critical; without it, many research activities would be significantly reduced or delayed.
- SIRF acts as a catalyst for leveraging further investment. The recurrent, predictable nature of QR funding help institutions attract substantial co-funding from industry, charities, and other public funders.
- SIRF also enables institutions to maintain high-quality research environments, and ensures the ongoing viability of their research activities. Both mainstream QR and the Research Capital Infrastructure Fund (RCIF) support the development and maintenance of research infrastructure, including laboratories, equipment, and digital resources. This investment ensures that institutions have the state-of-the-art facilities needed to conduct cutting-edge research and remain competitive on a global scale.

Supporting a healthy research sector: SIRF facilitates **collaboration** and **partnerships** with industry, government, and other external organisations. It supports activities such as joint studentships, co-funded pilots, and dedicated innovation hubs. These partnerships promote knowledge exchange, create opportunities for collaborative projects that address societal challenges, enhance the application of research and the real-world impact and application of research.

SIRF has been instrumental in driving positive changes in research culture. It supports initiatives such as mentoring, diversity training, and open research practices. SIRF invests in the development of people and skills by funding fellowships, PhD support, and training programmes. This helps build a skilled and diverse research workforce, supports career development, and ensures that researchers have the necessary expertise to conduct high-quality research.

Conclusions

Drawing on in-depth consultation with representatives from 25 institutions, the evaluation restates and confirms that **SIRF is a cornerstone of the England's research funding landscape**. It has a vital underpinning role, including addressing funding gaps and providing the stability and flexibility that enables institutions to pursue ambitious, long-term research strategies that would not otherwise be possible.

SIRF provides **long-term, stable and flexible funding** that enables institutions to invest in high-quality research, build institutional capability, and develop impactful collaborations and partnerships. It supports research aligned with national priorities and institutional strengths, and work with charities, businesses, and other partners that may not be viable, or would certainly operate at a more limited scale, without the support of SIRF.

Institutions consistently emphasised the importance of SIRF in shaping and sustaining their research missions and providing a funding mechanism that can be invested in the longer-term, supporting multi-year research endeavours. The flexibility of QR funding is balanced with more directive ring-fenced funding, which institutions value for the helpful direction and signalling of

strategic intent and national priorities, which might not receive the same level of focus without directed resources.

How some institutions direct SIRF has changed, however; with institutions referencing growing **financial pressures** influencing *how* research funding is allocated internally (i.e. influencing internal processes). Financial pressures are also influencing *where* research funding is allocated, and some institutions find that SIRF is “too small” to fully support high-risk initiatives or curiosity-driven research.

Contents

Foreword **2**
Authors and contributors **4**
Executive summary **5**
Aims 5
Introduction and background 5
Methodology and Theory of Change for SIRF 6
Evidence of impact 6
Conclusions 7
Contents **9**
Glossary **11**
Figures **14**
Tables **14**
1 Introduction and background **15**
1.1 Introduction 15
1.2 Purpose 16
1.3 Strategic Institutional Research Funding 16
2 Methodology **19**
2.1 Summary of the methodological approach 19
2.2 Limitations 21
2.3 SIRF Theory of Change 21
3 Evidence **24**
3.1 Financial context 24
3.2 Other contextual elements influencing SIRF usage 26
3.3 Funding distribution 26
3.3.1 Mainstream QR funding 26
3.3.2 QR Charity and QR Business 27
3.3.3 QR Research Degree Programme (RDP) 27
3.3.4 Research Capital Infrastructure Fund (RCIF) 27
3.3.5 Ring-Fenced Funds (ERC, PRF, PSF) 27
3.3.6 Specialist Provider Element (SPE) 28
3.3.7 QR National Research Libraries 28

3.4 SIRF uses 28
3.5 Outcomes and impact 29
3.5.1 Alignment with institutional, government and international priorities 29
3.5.2 Enabling research excellence 30
3.5.3 Supporting curiosity driven research 31
3.5.4 Supporting translational research and commercialisation 32
3.5.5 Investment in infrastructure 32
3.5.6 Leveraging additional investment 33
3.5.7 Strengthening collaborations, partnerships, and knowledge sharing 35
3.5.8 Skills, capacity, and research culture 37
3.6 Valued features of SIRF 38
3.6.1 Flexibility 39
3.6.2 Stability 39
3.6.3 Strategic autonomy 39
3.6.4 Catalytic role 40
3.6.5 Targeted innovation 40
4 Summary of findings 41
4.1 Strategic agility and responsiveness 41
4.2 Enable research excellence 42
4.3 Investment in infrastructure 43
4.4 Collaborations and leveraging funding 44
4.5 Support for people, skills, and culture 45
5 Conclusion and observations 47
5.1 Next steps 48
Appendix 49
A.1. Theory of Change for SIRF 49
A.1.1. Components of the Theory of Change 49
A.1.2. Change pathways 50
A.1.2.1. Allocation approaches 50
A.1.2.2. Causal pathways 50
A.1.2.3. Incentive mechanisms 51
A.1.2.4. External and mediating factors 51
A.1.3. Initial Theory of Change diagram 52
A.1.4. Reflections on evidence and updates to the SIRF ToC 54

A.1.5. Causal pathway statements and assumptions 55
A.2. Methodology 65
A.2.1. Sampling frame 65
A.2.2. Outreach 66
A.2.3. Introduction to the topic guide and interviews 66
A.2.4. The topic guide 66
A.2.5. Analysis of interviews 72
A.3. Detailed overview of uses of SIRF 74
A.4. CMO statements and findings 75
A.5. Extract of evidence in the public domain 109

Glossary

Acronym	Definition
AI	Artificial Intelligence
CDT	Centre for Doctoral Training
CMO	Context-Mechanism-Outcome Statements: Statements used in the Realist Evaluation design to capture how institutions use SIRF
DTP	Doctoral Training Partnership
ECR	Early Career Researcher
EDI	Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion
ERC	Enhancing Research Culture Fund: A ring-fenced fund that supports institutions in developing and initiating new activities in response to the government's R&D People and Culture Strategy
fEC	Full Economic Cost: The total cost of research, including direct and indirect costs
FTE	Full Time Equivalent: A unit of measurement that represents the total number of hours worked by employees in relation to a full-time work schedule
HE	Higher Education
HEI	Higher Education Institution

HEIF	Higher Education Innovation Fund: A funding stream that supports knowledge exchange activities between universities and businesses or other external organisations
HEPs	Higher Education Providers: Institutions that provide higher education services, including universities and colleges, which receive funding from Research England
HERC	Higher Education Research Capital
HPC	High-Performance Computing
KEF	Knowledge Exchange Framework
MCR	Mid-Career Researcher
msQR	Mainstream QR is based on the quality, volume and relative cost of research in different areas.
NHS	National Health Service
PGR	Postgraduate Research/Researcher
PRF	Participatory Research Funding: A ring-fenced fund that supports participatory or co-produced research involving communities and users of research
PSF	Policy Support Fund: A ring-fenced fund that assists universities in linking with policy research priorities at local, regional, national, and international levels
QR	Quality-related Research Funding: Research England's block grant funding for research. The calculation is made up of distinct elements, each based on different data sets. These quality-related research funds include: • Mainstream QR • QR charity support element • QR business research element • QR research degree programme supervision fund • QR national research libraries
QR RDP	QR Research Degree Programme: A formula-based funding stream that helps institutions meet the costs of supervising research degree programmes
R&D	Research and Development

R&I	Research and Innovation
RCIF	Research Capital Infrastructure Fund: A formula-based funding stream that supports sustainable investment in higher education research facilities and infrastructure
RE	Research England
REF	Research Excellence Framework: A system for assessing the excellence of research in UK institutions
RTO	Research and Technology Organisation
SIRF	Strategic Institutional Research Funding: A term used to capture all of Research England's formula driven research funding allocations to English higher education providers that can be used flexibly by the provider to serve their wider strategic priorities.
SPE	Specialist Provider Element: A formula-based funding stream which aims to support the excellence and capability of small and specialist providers, ensuring their continued contribution to the economy and society.
Specialist	For the purpose of this report, references made to specialist institutions refers to (i.e. institutions that are part of cluster STEM and cluster ARTS as defined by the KEF not those who are recipient of SPE).
STEM	Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics
ToC	Theory of Change: A methodology used in the evaluation to co-create an explicit, testable framework for SIRF
UKRI	UK Research and Innovation: The national funding agency investing in science and research in the UK. UKRI is a non-departmental public body sponsored by the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology (DSIT)
UoAs	Units Of Assessments: UoAs are disciplinary groupings used in the Research Excellence Framework (REF) to assess the quality of research across higher education institutions. These UoAs are the specific subject areas into which institutions make their research submissions for evaluation

Figures

Figure 1: SIRF allocations for 2024/25 18

Figure 2: Overview of evidence 19

Figure 3: SIRF programme Theory of Change visualisation 22

Figure 4: SIRF programme initial Theory of Change visualisation 53

Tables

Table 1: Analytical framework 20

Table 2: Overview of collaboration by type of institution 36

Table 3: Cluster distribution of the sample of institutions 65

Table 4: Regional distribution of the sample of institutions 66

Table 5: Rubric – approach to the interpretation of evidence 73

Table 6: Use of SIRF across institutions 74

Table 7: Overview of findings from related studies 109

1 Introduction and background

1.1 Introduction

Fortia Insight (previously RSM) and RAND Europe were commissioned by Research England (RE) in 2024 to undertake an impact evaluation of Strategic Institutional Research Funding (SIRF). SIRF is a ≈£2.3 billion[2] block grant provided to eligible institutions for research related activity each year.

The UK's dual support system provides public funding for research related activities to institutions through two complementary mechanisms:

1. **Project-specific grants**. These are competitive grants awarded by UKRI's Research Councils for specific research projects. These grants are allocated competitively through an established process dependent on expert review.
2. **Strategic Institutional Funding**. This funding is allocated as institutional block grants. Most of this funding is delivered by formulaic allocation. Strategic institutional funding is awarded by the devolved funding bodies and the Department for the Economy in Northern Ireland. In England, it is allocated by RE, which sits within UKRI.

SIRF refers to the strategic institutional block grant funding delivered by RE to English institutions for research related activity. SIRF encompasses all RE's formula driven research funding allocations made to English institutions that can be used flexibly to serve their wider strategic priorities. The dual support system comprises funding for knowledge exchange related activity called the Higher Education Innovation Fund (HEIF). HEIF is out of scope of this evaluation.

The Higher Education and Research Act 2017 sets out a commitment to maintain the balance of funding across the UK's dual support system. SIRF aims to foster a dynamic and responsive research environment, enabling institutions to invest in areas of strategic importance, nurture talent, and maintain world-class research infrastructure and capabilities. The objectives of SIRF are to:

- recognise research quality across the wide range of research outputs
- enable Higher Education Providers' strategic autonomy providing flexibility to progress their own research strategies and priorities
- enhance research infrastructure and promote effective use across the sector
- balance stability and dynamism to enable longer term strategic planning and agile response to emerging priorities
- balance transparency and burden by considering administrative burden while evidencing value
- enable partnerships to promote collaboration across the research sector, including higher education providers, industry, charities and communities
- drive research impact supporting connections with wider society to bring about positive socio-economic change

[2] Research England allocation data for 2024 to 2025 including Quality-related research (QR) funding, Higher Education Innovation Funding (HEIF), Research Capital Investment Fund (RCIF), further grants, and the Museums, Galleries and Collections fund.

- support people and culture building and maintaining an inclusive research system.

RE utilises two mechanisms to direct SIRF:

a) flexible funding that can be allocated by institutions to any research activity

b) ring-fenced funding that institutions must allocate to activities that support the specific aims of the ring-fenced fund

1.2 Purpose

The evaluation contributes to the evidence base on the impact, effectiveness and value of RE's formula research funding and is undertaken as part of a broader review of SIRF. This evaluation developed and tested a theory of change, through engagement with a representative sample of English institutions to gather insights on how SIRF operates and is used across the scale and diversity of providers. The context in which institutions are currently operating has been explored and is considered as a core part of this evaluation.

This report does not estimate what proportion of research delivered by English institutions is made possible by SIRF. RE's competitive schemes and knowledge exchange funding are also out of the scope of this evaluation.

Evaluating non-hypothecated, flexible funding models presents inherent challenges and complexities. This report seeks to demonstrate the impact of RE's flexible research funding, using a realist evaluation approach and builds on previous assessments and evaluations of QR funding. This report looks at the QR funding streams and the recently introduced ring-fenced funding steams. Some of the previous literature is included below.

- **The HEFCE Review of QR Funding** (2014), carried out by PACEC and the Centre for Business Research, was a comprehensive evaluation of QR funding. This study involved consultation with 25 institutions and econometric analysis. The report examined QR's allocation mechanisms, strategic use, and its impact on research outputs, infrastructure, and broader societal benefits.
- **The Value of QR Project** (2021), led by the Bennett Institute for Public Policy, focused on impacts of QR funding on people, drawing on examples from across the University of Cambridge. The study explored how QR supports researcher creativity, career continuity, and disciplines with limited external funding.
- **The Russell Group QR Briefing** (2024) provides a succinct overview of QR's strategic importance. Drawing on examples from seven Russell Group universities, the briefing highlights QR's role in driving economic growth and supporting long term strategic projects and high-risk research.

1.3 Strategic Institutional Research Funding

The term 'strategic institution research funding' covers all formula-driven research funding allocated by Research England to English institutions. It can be used flexibly by the institution to

support their wider strategic priorities.[3] **Quality-related research (QR) funding** is flexible and non-hypothecated. QR funding investment has played a distinct role in the UK's dual support system since the early 1990s (see for example the Review of the Research Excellence Framework: evidence report). Currently, it is composed of multiple streams which are:

- Mainstream QR. This is based on the quality, volume and relative cost of research in different areas, and accounts for about two-thirds of the total QR funding allocated by RE.
- QR Research Degree Programme (RDP) supervision fund. This allocation reflects postgraduate research student numbers in departments that attract mainstream QR, the relative costs of the subjects they are studying, quality and London weighting.
- QR charity support element (QR Charity). Many charities support research in higher education, but they are not always able to meet the full economic costs of research. This funding is provided to institutions in proportion to the London-weighted income institutions receive from charities for research.
- QR business research element (QR Business). This funding is provided to support institutions undertaking research with business and industry. This is allocated in proportion to the income they received from business for research.
- QR funding for national research libraries. This is additional support for five libraries which are designated as being of national importance.

Research Capital Infrastructure Fund (RCIF): this formula-based capital funding is provided to support sustainable investment in higher education research facilities and infrastructure. These grants are allocated through RCIF, which has two elements:

- HEI Research Capital England. Allocated in proportion to institutions two most recent years recurrent QR funding and research income from other (non-research council) sources.
- Higher Education Research Capital (HERC) England. Allocated in proportion to institutions three most recent years research income from Research Councils.

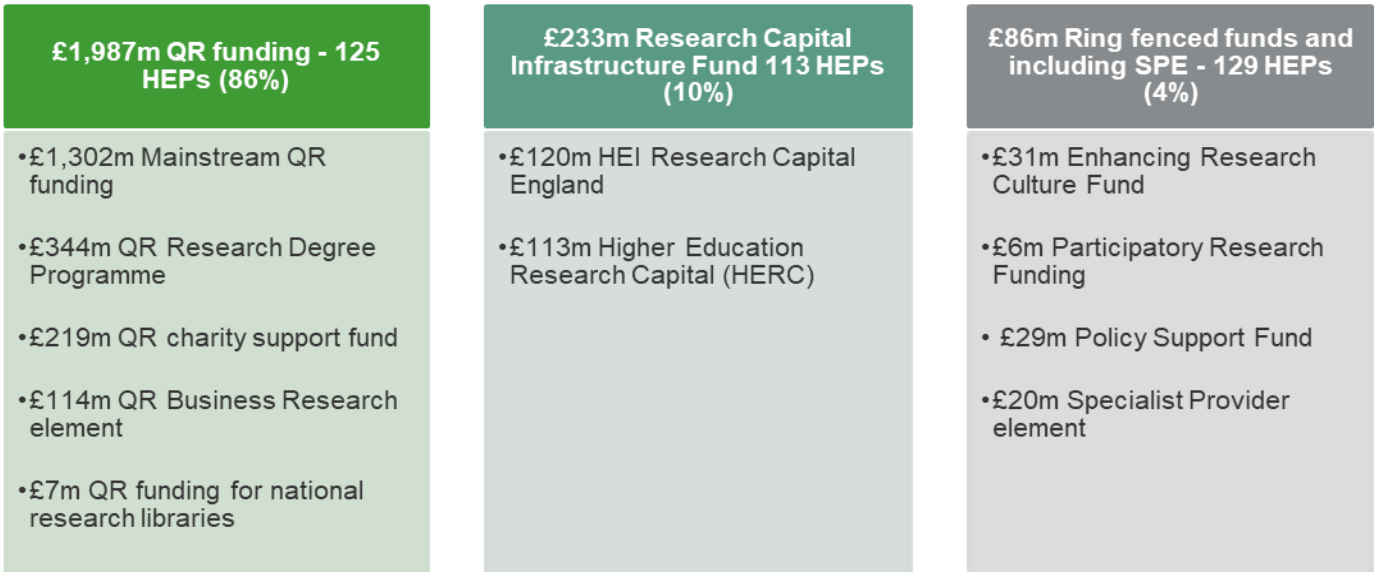
Ring-fenced Funds: these are time-limited funds designed to promote specific policies and incentivise/kick start particular behaviours or institutional led interventions.

- Enhancing Research Culture (ERC) Fund supports institutions to develop and initiate new activities in response to the government's Research and Development (R&D) People and Culture Strategy. ERC can be used by institutions to pilot new initiatives and to increase the scale of already proven activities.
- Participatory Research Funding (PRF) is allocated to support participatory or co-produced research, involving communities and users of research. PRF can be used to cover the costs of co-produced research and to run capacity-building activities.
- Policy Support Fund (PSF) is allocated to support institutions to link with policy research priorities and opportunities at local, regional, national and international levels.

Specialist Provider Element (SPE): recognises the characteristics of specialist providers and the contribution they make to their disciplines, associated industries, and more widely to society and the economy.

RE delivers the allocation of the SIRF steams. Figure 1 outlines the elements of SIRF in scope for this evaluation:

Figure 1: SIRF allocations for 2024/25



Source: Research England. Funding allocations rounded to the nearest million.

2 Methodology

2.1 Summary of the methodological approach

A range of factors influence how institutions use the funding they receive, and the impacts that they generate as a result. Consequently, a **realist evaluation approach** was adopted, enabling assessment of how and in what circumstances SIRF brings benefits. The impact evaluation methodology was informed by UK Government's central guidance on evaluation, as set out in HM Treasury's Magenta Book.

Context, Mechanism Outcome (i.e. CMO) statements were developed to detail the potential impact pathways through which SIRF adds value. The CMO statements along with a summary of evidence are presented in Appendix A.4. Evidence from interviews with a sample of 25 institutions was used to test these statements and findings and additional evidence from interviews are presented in the main body of this report.

The sample comprises of ~20% of English institutions that receive SIRF. It is weighted towards the largest institutions, receiving the greatest proportion of SIRF income and covers ~50% of the total SIRF budget. The sample comprises institutions where mainstream QR funding represents more than 5% of total institutions expenditure and those where QR funding comprises 1%, or less than 1% of the total institution expenditure.

Evidence presented in this report is based on a large volume of data collected as set out in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Overview of evidence



Interviews were held between November 2024 and February 2025. To maintain depth in the data collection, interviews were semi-structured, and the topic guide mostly comprised of open questions. Interviewees were invited to bring to the forefront SIRF related elements that they considered important and to provide examples to underpin their responses to interview questions.

No inferences were made in the presentation of evidence (i.e. if a respondent commented that QR RDP supports career development, it is not *assumed* that other funding streams also support career development).

The analysis includes examples of evidence from a relatively small, although representative sample of institutions. These examples provide indicative evidence, and should not be considered conclusive – see also Table 5 in Appendix A.2 for a summary of the approach to the interpretation of evidence.

Table 1 (overleaf) summarises the data sources and how they were analysed. The detailed operational plan, sampling frame and topic guides are set out in Appendix A.2.

Table 1: Analytical framework

Stage	Purpose	Principal activities	Key outputs
Phase 1 – Theory-building	Co-create an explicit, stable ToC for SIRF.	Desk review of RE policy documents and prior evaluations. Two co-design workshops with the Advisory Group. Rapid evidence scan of comparable block-grant schemes.	Draft ToC, 30+ Context Mechanism Outcome (CMO) statements, and a structured interview topic guide.
Phase 2 – Evidence generation	Gather primary data that can confirm, nuance or refute the CMO statements.	Semi-structured interviews with a representative sample of 25 institutions, including interviews with central leadership (≈ 70 interviewees). Four scoping interviews with other funding bodies. Engagement with the Advisory Group for sense-checking.	Clean interview transcripts coded to CMO statements; > 1 000 pages of notes and transcripts; interim briefing to Advisory Group.
Phase 3 – Synthesis & interpretation	Assemble, weigh and triangulate all strands of evidence.	Bottom-up tracing of data to each CMO. Top-down inductive review to identify cross-cutting patterns and outliers. Structured rating of evidence strength (compelling / substantial / indicative / no evidence).	Evaluation report; slide-deck and summary for RE senior management.

The English research and innovation system is a complex ecosystem comprising research, teaching and knowledge exchange activities. The Knowledge Exchange Framework (KEF) clusters group institutions into categories based on similar characteristics such as research intensity, scale, and subject areas. These clusters help provide context for comparing the mechanism pathways through which SIRF is used.[4] Throughout the sampling of institutions for data collection and the analysis of evidence from interviews, the KEF clusters were considered as a tool to identify the type of institutions. The KEF clusters are:

- **Cluster V**: Very large, very high research-intensive and broad-discipline universities

[4] The KEF clusters were devised to study knowledge exchange, but they are based on a study of institutional knowledge bases (measured by research staff by discipline), knowledge generation capabilities (measured by scale and quality of research activity), and physical assets (measured by research capital expenditure). These are all measures of research intensiveness – KE outputs play no part in the analysis. The clusters that are generated are clearly identifiable as similar groups by research intensiveness, and are stable over time, making them useful for this study. They also permit us to identify specialist institutions.

- **Cluster X**: Large, high research-intensive and broad-discipline universities
- **Cluster E**: Large, research-intensive universities
- **Cluster J**: Mid-sized, teaching-focused universities
- **Cluster M**: Small, teaching-focused universities
- **Cluster STEM**: Specialist, research-intensive institutions focused on science, technology, engineering, and mathematics
- **Cluster ARTS**: Specialist institutions focused on arts

For the purpose of this report, references made to specialist institutions refers to institutions that are part of cluster STEM and cluster ARTS, not those who receive SPE funding.

2.2 Limitations

The comprehensiveness of the data collection was limited as in-depth answers were not collected to the full set of interview questions for all institutions. However, institutions were generally forthcoming in their engagement. Interviews were limited to 90 minutes, with follow-up interviews scheduled as needed. Interviews were conducted with institutional representatives (e.g. Pro-Vice Chancellors or equivalent) who provided insight into the central allocation of SIRF across the institutions. Insights from Schools, Department leads, and individual researchers were not collected.

The sample is diverse and drawing conclusions of an 'average' institution is not possible. As the sample is weighted towards larger institutions responsible for a greatest proportion of SIRF income, the findings should not be generalised and/or assumed to represent the overall landscape.

2.3 SIRF Theory of Change

The SIRF ToC serves two main purposes. Firstly, it provides the guiding framework for the theory-based evaluation approach. Secondly, it aims to articulate a shared understanding of how SIRF is intended to work. It also highlights key feedback loops - the 'virtuous cycles' that an intervention seeks to create/strengthen and the 'vicious cycles' that it disrupts. It has an explicit focus on any intervention efficacy 'drag factors'. E.g., the effects of inflation and the COVID-19 pandemic on how quickly intended outcomes and impacts have arisen, and benefits realised.

The ToC considers both the relative certainty across the causal relationships and relative strength, providing an 'uncertainty aware' perspective. This allows the identification of mechanisms for which more/less evidence is collected and details how they work to produce results in difference contexts. The approach to developing the ToC uses a Green Book emphasis on 'Strategic Fit', examining how SIRF is supported by other interventions and in turn supports them. It also includes investigation of interactions within institutions and how they impacted SIRF outcomes.

The visual representation of the ToC for SIRF is shown in Figure 3 overleaf. The ToC for SIRF was developed using the following inputs:

- review of programme and policy documentation
- review of previous evaluations of non-hypothecated, flexible research funding in institutions

- scoping interviews with key stakeholders, including RE, the Department for the Economy Northern Ireland, and Medr (the Commission for Tertiary Education and Research) in Wales. Due to availability, conversations were held with representatives from the Scottish Funding Council after the initial development of the ToC
- sensemaking workshops with key stakeholders from RE and the evaluation advisory group established by RE for this project

The overall structure of the ToC diagram was informed by the 'SIRF Principles and Assumptions' infographic developed by RE. The eight 'objectives' presented in the infographic were also used to develop sets of causal pathways, which were tested in a workshop with RE and through feedback sessions with the Advisory Group. The final visual ToC diagram consolidates the pathways by organising them broadly around the infographic's four 'principles,' which have been renamed as the 'programme's objectives' in the ToC. The circled numbers correspond to specific causal pathway statements that form the basis of the Theory of Change, as detailed in Appendix A.1.5. Further detail on the ToC can be found in Appendix A.1.

The objectives as captured in the ToC are:

1. **address strategic priorities:** facilitating research responses to current and emerging local, national and global challenges
2. **enable research excellence:** supporting infrastructure, environment, culture and funding flexibility to enable high-quality research outputs and impact[5]
3. **contribute towards research sustainability:** enabling long-term financial and strategic planning
4. **support a healthy research sector:** supporting the wide range of institutions, research disciplines and missions

The outputs, outcomes and impacts cannot be neatly assigned to single objectives; there are interactions between groupings of results that relate to each objective.[6] For the ToC, the latter two 'objectives' have been grouped together as a single stream. This reflects their functional similarity in how SIRF contributes to them and for visual simplicity.

Several external factors described above have been omitted from the presentation for legibility. Key internal and external drivers of the financial mechanisms and stability inside institutions and the surrounding R&I ecosystem's economic health have been included. These factors play key roles in institutions' internal SIRF allocation behaviour (see green boxes at the bottom of the figure).

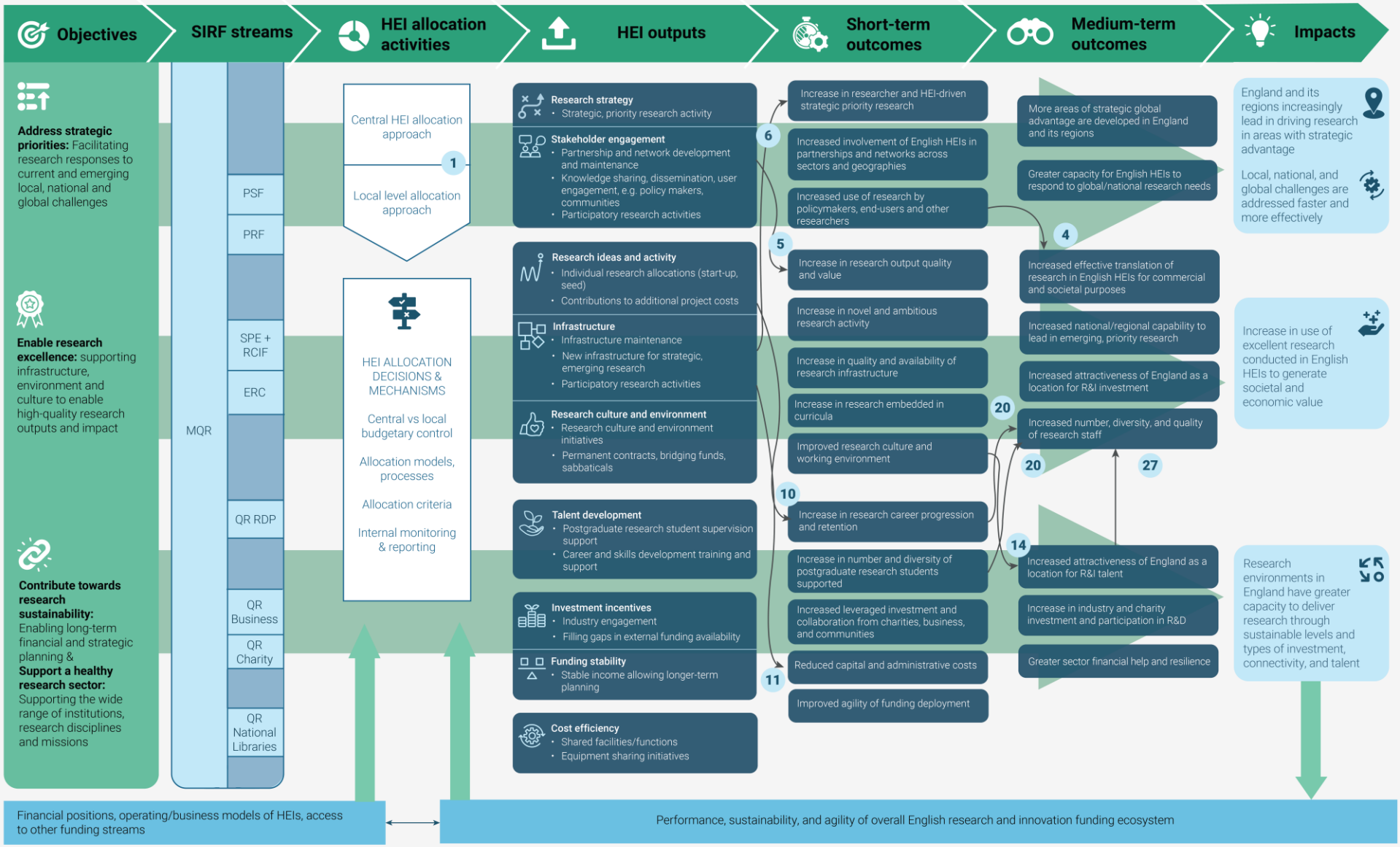
Figure 3: SIRF programme Theory of Change visualisation

[5] 'Funding flexibility' was not explicitly mentioned in the original SIRF Principles and Assumptions infographic. However, discussions with Research England highlighted that flexible nature of the funding to support curiosity-driven research is a core component of its ambition to support high-quality, impactful research.

[6] The key interactions between these three groups are marked by the thin arrows. Where causal pathways flow between the main objective pathways (indicated by large blue arrows), the small arrows have been annotated with numbered circles to indicate the reference number of the relevant causal statements described in the Appendix. The causal statements related to internal allocation of SIRF within institutions are grouped under allocation activities and so have not been annotated with numbers in the diagram.

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Problem statement: Competitive public and private research funding streams are a critical part of the national research and innovation ecosystem. The resources and time needed for some types of R&I activity as well as research and talent infrastructure development, however, requires financial stability and flexibility for institutions that are not easily obtained through grants and other competitive means alone. Furthermore, funding is often subject to changes and challenges in the HE financial streams, including unmet full economic costs of research and reductions or insecurities around income from teaching. Without long-term, stable funding the result is an R&I system that does not adequately invest in core aspects of the research environment, leading to missed opportunities for high quality and impactful research.



SIRF Streams Key: **MQR:** Mainstream Quality-related Funding, **PSF:** Policy Support Fund, **PRF:** Participatory Research Fund, **SPE:** Specialist Provider element, **RCIF:** Research Capital Investment Fund, **ERC:** Enhancing Research Culture, **QR Business:** Quality-related business research element, **QR RDP:** Quality-related research degree programme supervision fund, **QR Charity:** Quality-related charity support element, **QR National Libraries:** Quality-related National Research Library fund

3 Evidence

Section 3 presents the evidence from structured interviews with a sample of 25 institutions (see Figure 2, Section 2.1 for a detailed breakdown of evidence gathered). This section presents discussions on the current context in which English institutions are operating and the ways in which this influences SIRF usage across institutions (3.1 and 3.2). It also explores the ways in which SIRF is distributed internally by institutions (3.3), how it is used, (3.4) and the features of SIRF which are valued by the sector (3.5).

It is worth noting SIRF is a relatively new term, and in the interviews, some institutions interchanged between referencing SIRF and individual funding streams such as mainstream QR. As noted under the methodology, no inferences were made in the presentation of evidence which has led to some interchange in terminology throughout the evidence.

3.1 Financial context

Evidence from the data collected and wider literature shows that institutions are facing significant financial challenges, including challenges with the cost recovery on research.

In 2025, the OfS reported a third consecutive annual decline in sector finances and noted that 45.2% of institutions forecast a deficit in 2024–25. This indicates that, to remain sustainable, some institutions may need to implement material changes to funding models.[7]

Evidence from interviews highlighted that:

- Institutions facing increased financial pressures rely heavily on SIRF to **maintain their research activities and infrastructure**.
- Institutions in relatively stronger financial positions (i.e., those with larger reserves) can assign a higher share of mainstream QR for strategic growth and are therefore typically in a better position to **respond quickly and pivot research activity.**
- However, where QR is largely used to cover fEC shortfalls or total allocations are small (e.g. <£10m), **agility is correspondingly constrained**.

Financial challenges highlighted by institutions include:

- **Reliance on cross-subsidies**: Many institutions depend on international student fees to compensate for shortfalls in research funding. International student numbers have dropped across the sector. For 2023/24, the international student numbers in the UK dropped by 17% according to ONS.
- **Home tuition fees**: The undergraduate fee cap has remained frozen in cash terms, so the real-terms value has declined, adding further pressure on institution finances.
- **Client portfolio**: Institutions with a high reliance on charity or private-sector research income can be more exposed during periods of weak growth or downturn. These funding sources often

[7] Universities UK finds that that nearly half of UK universities are projected to be in financial deficit by the end of the 2024–25 academic year. See, also for example, research on the Financial sustainability of higher education providers in England: 2024 - Office for Students.

recover a smaller share of full economic costs, requiring greater internal contributions to deliver and sustain research activity.

- **National insurance and staffing-cost** increases contribute significantly to financial strain.
- **Restricted capital investments**: Limited surpluses and external funding hinder the ability to replace or upgrade outdated infrastructure, impacting long-term sustainability.
- **Short-term funding cycles**: Short annual spending windows make it challenging to plan and sustain recurrent funding projects. This influences strategic decision making.

In addition to the above, over the past decade, **overall reporting on cost recovery on research indicated it is in decline**. For Research Council projects, average recovery reporting was under 70% in 2021/22. Institutions therefore rely more on non-hypothecated income (especially mainstream QR) and other sources to meet full economic costs (see UKRI issues paper).

Institutional responses to these financial challenges include:

- **Adapting the use of SIRF due to current financial pressures**. Typically, this means rebalancing spend towards maintaining core research activity (e.g., covering fEC shortfalls on external awards, retaining key research and technical posts, keeping shared facilities and doctoral support running).
- **Increasingly relying on SIRF for staff and operational costs**, offsetting areas impacted by reduced income from tuition fees and international student enrolments.
- Scaling back supporting initiatives like Doctoral Training Partnerships (DTP) and Centres for Doctoral Training (CDT) programmes and large research bids. This occurs when institutional contributions, for example topping-up stipends, covering supervisory time or co-funding industry-linked studentships, can no longer be absorbed by SIRF or other internal sources.
- **Prioritising collaborations with higher cost-recovery**, typically with industry or government, while relying on SIRF to take on smaller, carefully chosen charity-led projects where the overhead gap can still be bridged.

Despite significant financial sustainability challenges, 10 institutions reported that they have continued using SIRF in line with their established institutional practice. For example, maintaining core research environments and infrastructure; addressing fEC shortfalls on external awards; supporting people and PGRs; and pump-priming novel/high-risk or emerging areas, rather than diverting it to plug day-to-day deficits.

These responses typically reflect institutions that allocated SIRF centrally or that top-sliced a substantial amount of mainstream QR.

> *"We might see a shrinkage or consolidation in the research base… but at this moment in time it hasn't changed yet."*
>
> *"If the financial stress extends, we might have to reduce how many big grants we chase — they tie up a lot of cash-flow up-front for staff, equipment and the 20 % of fEC we have to find ourselves, so they can end up running at a loss."*

3.2 Other contextual elements influencing SIRF usage

Variations in institutions' capital intensity, the condition of estates, and geographic factors, amongst others, influences how SIRF is distributed internally and used.

Institutions differ in the way that they use SIRF. Recognising contextual variation enables setting more nuanced expectations for what constitutes effective and impactful use of SIRF in different settings. Variation in timelines and size of SIRF streams affect allocations within institutions. The ring-fenced funding streams are characterised by short time horizons and internal application turnaround times, which means that institutions need to take a short-term approach to how they deploy them. Similarly, the 'relatively modest' size of ring-fenced funding sometimes means it cannot be leveraged for large-scale cultural impacts.

The current financial environment has influenced the use of SIRF (see Section 3.1). Interviews also identified other contextual elements that influence how SIRF is used within institutions. Evidence includes:

- **Capital intensity**: Institutions, with significant laboratories, report using both (i) RCIF for capital purchases/replacements and statutory/compliance upgrades, and (ii) top-slicing mainstream QR (typically 25-35%) for associated running costs, service contracts, depreciation contributions and small items of equipment.
- **Estates**: Institutions highlighted substantial, recurring costs to maintain and refurbish ageing estates and compliance-heavy research facilities (e.g., ventilation/air handling, clean rooms, building safety, and digital upgrades), which often outstrip available capital. The condition of the estate matters and institutions with ageing estates frequently use a higher share of RCIF for existing obligations/backlog maintenance, leaving less funding available for new research platforms.
- **Geographic cluster and partner density**: Proximity to industry, NHS trusts, Research and Technology Organisations (RTOs) increases opportunities to leverage finance and accelerate research. Large and research-intensive institutions that are London-based commented that this often gives them an advantage in using SIRF to leverage other investment.

3.3 Funding distribution

The approach to the internal distribution of funding streams depends on an institution's internal decision-making processes, research profile and strategic priorities.

3.3.1 Mainstream QR funding

Interview discussions focused on the institutional business model used to distribute SIRF internally. These are:

- **Centralised:** Funds are held centrally and allocated strategically, often by a central committee or senior leadership team.
- **Decentralised:** Funds are devolved to faculties, schools, or departments, which then make allocation decisions with greater autonomy over their share of Mainstream QR.
- **Hybrid (top-slicing):** A portion is "top-sliced" and used by centralised teams for strategic priorities (e.g., research beacons, infrastructure, interdisciplinary initiatives), with the remainder

devolved to academic units. The pooling of resources was noted to allow for more ambitious infrastructure projects and pump-priming.

Evidence

- 4 of 25 institutions (16%) distribute funds from a centralised team (3 of these are specialist institutions).
- 19 of 25 institutions (75%) use a hybrid model with some top-slicing; the proportion top-sliced ranges from 1% to over 55%. The three institutions that top-slice a large percentage (30% or more) of QR funding comprise a very large and very high research-intensive institution, a large and broad-discipline institution, and a mid-sized institution that has more of a teaching focus.
- 2 of 25 institutions (8%), both large, high research-intensive and broad-discipline universities, operate a fully decentralised model with no top-slicing, strategic decisions are therefore made at the faculty level.

The evidence suggests that institutions typically carve out a modest, centrally coordinated pot, to underwrite small cross-functional teams and enabling costs (policy-engagement officers, knowledge-exchange managers, community-research coordinators, travel, events and data-visualisation tools) responsible for translating research into something communities, policymakers and industry can use. In some cases, the pot is co-managed with faculties/schools, but governance and prioritisation usually sit centrally to align with institutional and place-based priorities.

3.3.2 QR Charity and QR Business

In some interviews, QR Charity and QR Business were noted to be centrally pooled with Mainstream QR. QR Charity and QR Business funds are typically allocated as top-ups to support charity and business research. These funds help maintain large-scale charity and business activities but only partially offset project costs. Interviewees estimated that, even with QR Charity and QR Business, they still face 10–30 percent fEC shortfalls on projects, which they must bridge with mainstream QR and external co-investment.

3.3.3 QR Research Degree Programme (RDP)

QR RDP is largely devolved to faculties and schools in accordance with student numbers. At some institutions, a top-sliced proportion of QR RDP was said to be allocated to specific, strategic initiatives (e.g. match-funded PhD studentships with industry partners and charities, the creation of doctoral training centres and central Research & Innovation Academies). In small institutions, QR RDP tends to be managed centrally.

3.3.4 Research Capital Infrastructure Fund (RCIF)

Most institutions allocate RCIF via a central committee (e.g. a Capital Research Assets Board or equivalent). They apply a one or two stage process which prioritises high-value equipment, specialised laboratories, and digital research platforms that individual departments could not afford alone. Some large institutions run annual open-bid rounds for RCIF allocation.

3.3.5 Ring-Fenced Funds (ERC, PRF, PSF)

These funds are typically distributed via internal calls for proposals and/or on a project-level basis, with clear criteria aligned to the fund's purpose (e.g., EDI, participatory research, policy

engagement). In many cases a modest annual pot is held centrally for dedicated roles, such as participatory research officers, whose salaries and administrative support are charged against the fund.

3.3.6 Specialist Provider Element (SPE)

The SPE is awarded to 21 institutions, recognising the characteristics of specialist providers and the contribution they make to their disciplines, associated industries and more widely to society and the economy. Only three institutions in the sample receive the fund. Representatives from two institutions spoke about using this funding to cover high-cost specialist equipment, calibration and technician support and no further detail on the allocation process was provided.

3.3.7 QR National Research Libraries

Five institutions are eligible for QR National Research Libraries. Of the sample, only one institution was in receipt of this funding, which was discussed in their interview. The respondent emphasised that the grant pays for cataloguing, digital preservation and specialist staff whose expertise would be difficult to fund from project income.

3.4 SIRF uses

Institutions use SIRF to support a range of activities. Some of the SIRF streams are pooled and sometimes SIRF is pooled with other (non-SIRF) funding streams.

The list of uses of SIRF below is illustrative rather than exhaustive and highlights areas most frequently identified by institutions in our sample. Data underpinning this summary is presented in Appendix A.3.

- **Supporting researchers and related career development**. All institutions in the sample use SIRF (e.g. Mainstream QR, QR RDP and PSF) to support research activities. Funding is allocated to fellowships, PhD support, training, network building, research festivals, and/or career development.
- **Staff retention and recruitment**. Nearly all institutions in the sample use SIRF (e.g. QR) to support staff retention and recruitment through the provision of short-term contracts to bridge gaps between grant-funded projects, and/or for the appointment of additional research-active staff, underpinning recruitment of staff.
- **Seed-funding/bridging-funding**. Nearly all institutions in the sample use SIRF (e.g. Mainstream QR) to seed fund new research areas, to support with the creation of impactful companies, to pump prime projects, and/or to fund Research Accelerator Grants.
- **Supporting external grant costs**. Nearly all institutions in the sample use SIRF (e.g. Mainstream QR and QR Charity and QR Business) to provide match funding on grants, to support covering the fEC of research, and to provide administrative support.
- **Novel/high-risk research**. Most institutions in the sample use SIRF (e.g. Mainstream QR) to support novel and/or high-risk research, amongst other things, by supporting emerging interdisciplinary areas, clinical trials, spinoff activity, capital investment, and/or policy engagement.

- **Maintaining infrastructure/capital**. Most institutions in the sample use SIRF (e.g. Mainstream QR and RCIF) to help fund new labs, capital works and to replace, maintain, procure and upgrade equipment, and/or cover estate costs. At some institutions, funding volumes were considered small or not significant enough to result in meaningful investment in infrastructure and capital.
- **Other uses of SIRF** for long-term strategic investment include, but are not limited to, the provision of support for:
  - core funding for research activities (e.g. mainstream QR, ring-fence streams)
  - balancing the research budget (e.g. mainstream QR)
  - supporting research capacity (e.g. QR)
  - EDI programmes (e.g. Mainstream QR, ERC)
  - research culture initiatives (e.g. ERC)
  - policy and public engagement and impact activities, including community-facing work such as "festival of communities" events (PRF)
  - partnership building (e.g. QR and ERC)
  - funding staff for REF impact case studies (e.g. mainstream QR)
  - international scholar visiting programme (e.g. mainstream QR)
  - commercialisation activities (e.g. mainstream QR, QR Business)

Ring-fenced SIRF streams have been used in tandem with mainstream QR to support both foundational and strategic research activities. For example, representatives from ten institutions described channelling part of their mainstream QR or ring-fenced allocations into the **salaries and overheads of engagement teams**. Typically, these are small units that organise policy roundtables, run citizen-science labs, curate data visualisations or broker collaborations with local charities and businesses.

RCIF was said to be combined with other sources of funding (philanthropic gifts, industry collaborations or internal borrowing). This includes where RCIF is layered with other funding sources to assemble the full capital package, and cases where RCIF helps leverage additional investment by signalling institutional commitment or providing match funding. RCIF can also bridge residual gaps to meet the full cost of world-leading facilities.

> *"We received a UKRI Foundation award for some specialist microscope kit last year that was matched with RCIF funding, making the project feasible"*

3.5 Outcomes and impact

3.5.1 Alignment with institutional, government and international priorities

SIRF provides institutions the flexibility and stability to pursue their own strategic research priorities and allows them to balance government priorities with their own missions.

All institutions reported that **QR funding underpins activities that align with institutional strategies** (e.g., seeding new areas, investing in high-performance computing (HPC) and building staff capacity). QR funding also provides institutions the strategic agility to **swiftly allocate**

resources to respond to local industrial needs, urgent interdisciplinary calls, or unforeseen policy questions. Representatives noted that, without SIRF, undertaking such strategic work would be "very difficult" and activities would be significantly reduced or delayed, with some elements unlikely to proceed at all. 11 institutions indicated that SIRF plays a crucial role in helping them **align their research strategies with both national and global priorities**. Through SIRF, these institutions can respond effectively to strategic areas identified by government or UKRI, such as artificial intelligence, health, net zero, and regional development. Additionally, SIRF supports interdisciplinary and participatory research initiatives that address broader societal needs.

> *[QR funding enables] "being able to strategically plan for the future rather than being reactive, such that we can proactively drive institutions forward to meet the government, UKRI funder and wider funding priorities".*
>
> *"This [SIRF's] flexibility allows us [the institution] to adapt to evolving local and national priorities without compromising our long-term research goals. For instance, when the UK Government emphasises areas like AI and quantum computing, we can swiftly redirect resources to these domains."*

As an example, a representative from one institution made the case that during the COVID-19 pandemic they swiftly invested in research on vaccine development. Another representative noted how they invested in research around antimicrobial resistance, when this became a UK and international priority. A third institutional representative spoke about prioritising investment in safe-AI pilot studies. In each of these cases**, it was possible for the institution to invest resources and equipment within days**.

Ring-fenced elements of SIRF are explicitly designed to align with government priorities. For example, research culture, EDI, and policy engagement. Institutions highlighted that this funding helps emphasise areas of priority, which in the absence of ring-fenced funding could be deprioritised.

> *"The clear prioritisation that's set with ring-fenced funding streams has allowed us to create huge change across the sector in a way that would not have been possible if that had been combined into a recurrent annual pot in the same way. If those funding streams were to end, it would be inevitable that some of that progress would stall.*
>
> *"The **Participatory Research Funding** has really enabled us to take forward a more proactive and strategic approach to how we support public engagement and involvement in research".*
>
> *"The **Policy Support Fund** similarly allows us to seed certain activities (…) prioritise policy engagement and the role that policy engagement plays in delivering impact."*
>
> *"Our **research culture funding** has a number of streams that are enabling individuals and teams to do more in depth research and development than they have done previously"*

3.5.2 Enabling research excellence

SIRF plays a pivotal role in enabling institutions to achieve and sustain research excellence. SIRF contributes to enhancing research quality and impact by providing stability, supporting capacity and capability building, incentivising excellence and by helping improve research quality.

Institutions highlighted that SIRF plays a pivotal role in enabling them to achieve and sustain research excellence by:

- equipping institutions to maintain core research environments, cover unrecovered additional costs of underfunded research, and plan long-term investments in impactful research
- allowing institutions to direct funding where it is most needed and to sustain research capacity when other sources fluctuate

Evidence from 23[8] institutions highlighted that SIRF supports research excellence by:

- **Providing stability:** Mainstream QR funding offers stability, ensuring continuity in research activities and supporting longer-term projects that are essential for impactful research outcomes. This funding reduces stop-start effects, preserves equipment uptime and research cohorts, and enables multi-year methods development. These are conditions associated with rigorous, reproducible outputs and sustained impact.
- **Supporting capacity and capability building:** SIRF enables institutions to build and maintain capacity, including the development of specialised teams, ensuring the sustainability and growth of research activities. Representatives from very large and very high research-intensive institutions (KEF clusters V and X) stressed SIRF's unique value, especially mainstream QR, in its combination of predictability and institutional discretion which supports institutions direct funding to research-related activities that build and maintain capacity.
- **Incentivising excellence:** SIRF incentivises excellence across multiple aspects, including academic impact, societal and economic contributions and aligning with government priorities. For example, representatives from two very large, very high research-intensive institutions devolve most QR using REF-weighted formulas, so that departments have a clear line-of-sight between performance and resources. This creates a feedback loop that strengthens outputs, environment and impact, reinforcing excellence over time.
- **Improving research quality:** 11 institutions indicated that SIRF has facilitated the delivery of more impactful research. This has, for example, been achieved by enabling strategic investments in interdisciplinary research with the potential to enhance cross-faculty collaboration, and by supporting strategic partnerships. Increased public engagement has also helped improve research quality.

3.5.3 Supporting curiosity driven research

Some institutions support curiosity driven research through SIRF. Overall, funding of curiosity driven research through SIRF is limited across the research community, in part due to the level of funding available.

11 of 25 institutions reported using discretionary mainstream QR to support curiosity-driven and/or early-stage work. For example, SIRF was reported to have been allocated to test unproven concepts, establish interdisciplinary centres and/or generate the proof-of-concept results required to unlock larger UKRI or industrial awards.

However, four interviewees, covering a STEM-specialist institution, a mid-sized teaching-focused institution and a very large, high research-intensive institution, cautioned that the share of mainstream QR left after covering fEC shortfalls, core services and strategic programmes is often too small to shoulder genuine blue-skies research. Curiosity-driven projects were noted to be

[8] Interviews were semi-structured and representatives from two institutions were not directly posed this question.

placed lower on internal priority lists. Interviewees attributed this primarily to current financial pressures absorbing flexible QR; a minority felt curiosity-driven work had long been constrained, but pressures have exacerbated this.

> *"We'd love to do more purely novel research from QR, but the scale is limited; still, it does let us do fundamental or applied 'risky' areas".*

3.5.4 Supporting translational research and commercialisation

Translational research and commercialisation are critical for institutions as they transform fundamental discoveries into useable innovations, scale and sustain those innovations for economic and societal benefit, and in turn, attract funding, talent and partnerships through demonstrable impact, ultimately contributing to research excellence.12 of 25 institutions reported **that SIRF (mainly QR and ring-fenced funds) strengthens their research and translational capabilities**. In turn, this enhances their attractiveness to external co-investment from industry partners, venture capital funds, philanthropic donors, and, in some cases, public agencies. Within this group:

- Five institutions reported that improved research outputs (e.g. quality and novelty of publications) have enhanced their credibility in the research community, enabled entry into new research domains, and supported pump-priming activities, thereby positioning them to apply for, and potentially secure, larger external grants.
- Four large, research-intensive institutions linked SIRF-supported commercial outputs, spinouts, and translational research to increased appeal for venture capital and other forms of external investment.
- Three institutions emphasised the role of infrastructure development and capacity/network-building in attracting co-investment for collaborative projects with industry and government.

Some institutions also linked SIRF to institutional productivity (e.g., faster translation, better use of facilities) and, in some cases, to wider local/regional economic benefits.

> *"The University is the 'first investor' in all of our spinouts. We require SIRF (and HEIF) to enable us to create the internal investment funds to make our spinouts investable by venture capitalists. This can be relatively modest investments (c. £25K), it can be convertible loans to cover the time until an Innovate-UK grant can be claimed, or it can be more significant investments of c. £150K."*
>
> *"Our translational innovation centres have all benefited from SIRF investment either to underpin their set up, or to support the original basic research on which they were founded."*

3.5.5 Investment in infrastructure

SIRF is a flexible, strategic catalyst that is key to supporting infrastructure maintenance and development. Where funding levels are large enough to cover both capital and resource, it underwrites specialist infrastructure, derisks exploratory work and strengthens the UK's attractiveness to top research talent. Where allocations are smaller, it provides a vital lifeline for piloting ideas and sustaining a credible research environment.

Maintaining cutting-edge research infrastructure was recognised as important by every institution interviewed. 16 institutions went further, explicitly calling it "crucial" or "essential". Respondents emphasised that up-to-date facilities are essential for attracting top researchers,

retaining staff, and/or fostering collaborations. Institutions also noted the role of unique infrastructure in giving institutions a competitive edge. “If you’ve got particular items of equipment that only exist in two places in the UK, it stands to reason you’ll attract researchers who need those facilities.”

Types of investments in infrastructure include:

- **Strategic investments**. Roughly half of respondents (12 of 25), particularly those in science, technology and medicine, described SIRF as the connective funding that allows them to buy or maintain big ticket assets such as high-performance computing clusters, advanced imaging suites, 5G test bed activity, and climate-controlled greenhouses and specialised cleanrooms.
- **Investment in critical equipment replacement**. Many mid-sized and smaller teaching-led institutions rely on RCIF for replacing or upgrading essential research equipment (such as digital platforms or visual-arts repositories). Also, STEM heavy institutions emphasise the need for RCIF to support costly and rapidly depreciating equipment.

> *“RCIF provides the financial flexibility to develop and maintain high-quality, accessible research infrastructure that fosters collaboration and resource sharing with external partners.”*

16 institutions reflected that **RCIF is invaluable for sustaining and enhancing research infrastructure, but its sufficiency is a recurrent concern**. The funding is often described as "indispensable yet insufficient." For example, a research-intensive institution described its RCIF as modest relative to its estate backlog, limiting scope for new platforms beyond essential replacements. Mainstream QR was said to be increasingly absorbed by operating continuity, reducing discretionary headroom. For very large infrastructure or whole-estate refurbishments, **SIRF on its own is neither intended nor sufficient to meet full costs**; it operates by design as seed/match funding alongside Research Council capital, philanthropy, borrowing or industry.

> *“We could spend RCIF time and time again. It’s never enough to cover all our needs."*
>
> *“We’ve got an aging campus, and as a very small university, we feel every bump in the road. We fundamentally need to cut costs and prioritise core areas just to remain operational amidst a challenging financial landscape.”*
>
> *“RCIF is our only capital source and absolutely critical; current levels barely keep facilities running, let alone fund new technology”.*

3.5.6 Leveraging additional investment

Most institutions treat SIRF, especially mainstream QR, as a catalytic pot that multiplies external investment. Interviewees described using modest internal allocations for pilot data, prototype equipment or early stakeholder engagement; these seeds then unlocked follow-on awards worth many times the original outlay.

SIRF acts as a catalytic funding source, enabling institutions to de-risk early-stage research and leverage substantial external investment. In 2022/23 universities collectively matched their QR allocation with an estimated £5 billion from internal resources (see UKRI Data Pack), directing those funds into research and innovation activity. QR also catalyses external co-investment with analysis by Imperial showing that every £1 of mainstream QR attracted roughly £5.88 in research grants and contracts from business, charitable, industrial and government sources in 2022/23.

This is further evidenced by interviewees in our sample, who describe mainstream QR as the "primer" that converts institutional and external interest into sustained research capability.

18 of 25 institutions highlighted SIRF's value in "pump-priming" relationships using small, flexible allocations to initiate or deepen partnerships that later attract co-funding. 11 large, research-intensive institutions explained how modest SIRF investments in workshops or proof-of-concept activities led directly to match-funding from industry or charities, with examples ranging from prototype data-set development to co-funded fellowship schemes.

Several institutions reported securing multi-million-pound industry and public grants as a direct result of SIRF-backed pump-priming. 14 institutions reported that SIRF supports leverage by keeping core facilities operational and "award-ready."

- **Mainstream QR**. This was identified as the critical enabler for leveraging additional investment by 21 of 25 institutions. Mainstream QR covers running costs/compliance for labs and shared research platforms. For example, centrally managed core facilities such as advanced imaging suites, HPC clusters, secure data environments and clean rooms, which strengthens major capital bids (and, in several cases, led to awards). Mainstream QR is frequently the primer enabling multi-year planning and partner confidence (staff feasibility, bridging).
- **RCIF**. Seven very large research-intensive institutions described co-investment models in which RCIF provided capital match and industry added further co-funding, enabling laboratory upgrades or specialist equipment purchases. RCIF was also commented to signal capital commitment.
- **Ring-fenced funding**. This has a catalytic role in enabling collaboration and place-based policy. Across institutions these targeted funds act as catalysts within their specific remits: they leverage co-funding from industry or charities, seed collaborations, pilot new initiatives, and embed inclusive practices that would otherwise struggle to secure traditional grant support. For example, ring-fenced funding was said to enable engagement in place-based policy work, which later attracted additional funding.

> *"SIRF contributes significantly to the sound financial foundations and physical infrastructure at department, division, and university levels that attracts and convinces global businesses to invest in our research."*
>
> *"Through the QR business research element, SIRF enables us to engage with industry partners, fostering innovation and attracting further investment. These collaborations are essential for translating research into practical applications, thereby contributing to the UK's economic growth."*

Important variations and caveats emerged in interviews. Where mainstream QR is largely absorbed by fEC/continuity costs, or allocations are small, the headroom to use QR as match/seed funding is limited. Five smaller or specialist institutions indicated that, while mainstream QR underpinned their ability to apply for external grants, they lacked the scale to convert pump-priming into large-scale partnerships. Four respondents observed that sectoral strengths (for example, proximity to regional industry clusters) and institutional prestige sometimes drove investment more than SIRF itself.

3.5.7 Strengthening collaborations, partnerships, and knowledge sharing

SIRF provides the flexible, foundational funding needed to unlock partnerships, and sustain engagement with business, charities, communities, and government.

> *"The fact that we have SIRF enables us to put in the time and effort to build the relationships that ultimately will enable us to work collaboratively with external partners on externally funded programmes. So, without that funding, we wouldn't be able to build those programme teams and partnerships."*

14 of 25 institutions explicitly cited **SIRF as a catalyst for enabling partnerships with other researchers, industry, government, and international institutions**. A key function of SIRF is its ability to "buy-out" and "purchase" research and academic staff time. This enables individuals to carry out engagement activities which would not be possible otherwise.

As is the case across the other themes explored in this report, the way SIRF is used for and impacts investment in collaboration opportunities varies across institutions. For example, PSF was used to support pre-existing activities in this area, but for some institutions, it also played a pivotal role in establishing central teams and hubs that initiated engagement activities that would have not happened otherwise.

Institutions said mainstream QR "oils the wheels" of collaboration, by letting them mobilise quickly for competitive calls, underwriting bid-team time and assembling match-funding. For example, one institution carved out a top-sliced share of its mainstream QR funding to support teams in developing partnerships with two global companies. Another institution earmarked part of its SIRF for research-mobility awards that have since underpinned a tri-lateral alliance with overseas universities.

23 of 25 institutions offered substantive feedback on QR Business and QR Charity as top-ups for supporting business and charity research. PRF was highlighted to enable genuine community collaboration. Without PRF, activities such as public-outreach days, rural micro-mobility co-design with young people, and long-running patient-and-public-involvement panels would be much harder to deliver.

Benefits of SIRF facilitated collaboration include:

- **Sustaining ongoing research partnerships and initiating new partnerships**. SIRF was cited as being critical for sustaining ongoing partnerships in interviews with seven institutions**.** Additionally, six institutions described SIRF as being instrumental in initiating new cross-disciplinary or external collaborations (e.g. pooling small allocations with other universities to seed projects that later secured larger grants).
- The **facilitation of regional collaboration through centres of excellence, research centres, and partnerships with local authorities** was emphasised in interviews with six institutions. Some institutions also referenced regional programmes, e.g., UKRI Innovation Accelerators and Investment Zones, funded primarily through those schemes. Participatory and community-engaged research is also enabled by ring-fenced funds, although their modest scale can constrain sustained activity and long-term impact. Both QR and ring-fenced funding contribute to place-based policy and regional development goals.

- **Enhancement of the impact and application of research**. Seven institutions, large research-intensive universities and mid-sized institutions, emphasised that business collaborations significantly enhance impact.

Other benefits of collaboration cited in interviews include improvement of research performance metrics (e.g. REF and KEF), graduate employability, and institutional reputation.

The type of collaboration varies by funding volumes and type of institution – see Table 2.

Table 2: Overview of collaboration by type of institution

Type of institution	Type of collaboration and funding stream
Very large/large research-intensive institutions (KEF clusters V, X, E):	**Mainstream QR**: Often used for pump-priming interdisciplinary centres, buying out staff time for collaboration leads, and covering costs for multi-lateral agreements. **QR Business and QR Charity**: 12 very large research-intensive universities and five large research-intensive institutions highlighted these as helping bridge the gap left by charity and business grants that cover only direct costs. These institutions described how QR allocations underwrite essential infrastructure, overheads and dedicated partnership staff, making otherwise unviable collaborations feasible. For instance, representatives from very large institutions stressed that, without the QR Charity, high-cost medical research or spin-out collaborations simply could not proceed. **RCIF**: Used for major infrastructure projects, sometimes collaborative in nature and often in conjunction with external funding. • **Ring-fenced funds**: Used for policy engagement and participatory research.
Mid-sized teaching focused institutions (KEF clusters J, M):	**Mainstream QR**: Used to sustain key research roles that support external grant applications and maintain existing partnerships. **QR Business and QR Charity**: Receive modest levels of funding and this is used mainly to sustain or deepen existing links, not as the primary enabler of new collaborations. **RCIF**: Used for essential equipment replacement and modest collaborative upgrades, such as digital platforms or visual-arts repositories. • **Ring-fenced funds**: Used for small-scale participatory and policy engagement projects.

Specialist Institutions (STEM, ARTS)	**Mainstream QR**: Used to sustain key research roles that support external grant applications and maintain existing partnerships. **QR Business and QR Charity**: Receive modest levels of funding and this is used mainly to sustain or deepen existing links, not as the primary enabler of new collaborations. **RCIF**: Used for essential equipment replacement and modest collaborative upgrades, such as digital platforms or visual-arts repositories. • **Ring-fenced funds**: Used for small-scale participatory and policy engagement projects.

3.5.8 Skills, capacity, and research culture

SIRF, particularly mainstream QR and QR RDP, strengthens research capacity by supporting recruitment, staff development, staff retention, and technical skills training across academic career stages.

QR RDP is viewed as critical and works in concert with other funding to support all postgraduate research provision. It is used to cover supervision costs, studentships, and to leverage match funding, widening participation, and improving training infrastructure.

SIRF, and in particular the ERC fund, has enabled institutions to experiment with and embed practices that support inclusive, collaborative, and high-performing research cultures.

19 of 25 institutions reported that SIRF contributed to the expansion or maintenance of research capacity. 13 institutions explicitly reported using SIRF to support talent acquisition (projects, spinouts, campaigns, strategic teams). SIRF indirectly supports retention by creating an environment people want to stay in; institutions track people benefits via surveys, dashboards, and/or pulse instruments.

Early Career Researchers (ECRs) & established researchers: Across responses from 19 institutions, investment in research-staff development (e.g., ECR training, mentoring) was primarily attributed to QR RDP; mainstream QR was occasionally cited as an enabler (e.g., small buyouts, bridging), rather than the main budget for structured development programmes.

Postgraduate researchers: Across institutions, QR RDP funding is allocated to support supervision and training costs (reported by 11 institutions); top-ups to studentships/fees and small stipends (e.g., conference travel); match or set-up for doctoral colleges/centres and DTP/CDT places; and, in some cases, joint industry studentships. The funding was commented to help institutions increase the number of high-calibre postgraduate researchers in England and sustain a larger, more diverse PGR population. In addition to the abovementioned benefits, QR RDP funding significantly impacts the quality and sustainability of postgraduate research provision.

QR RDP funding was said to be crucial but did not cover the full supervisory cost. Two representatives of institutions suggested that QR RDP funding covers about 25%-38% of the costs associated with postgraduate research activities. Five interviewees flagged that the real-terms value of QR RDP has fallen.

> *"It's allowing a research endeavour to happen, therefore, through supporting and underpinning our research endeavour, we are recruiting researchers. We are recruiting students; we are recruiting a pipeline of staff... We wouldn't have been able to deliver the activity."*
>
> *"RDP is hugely important; it's really been an important element in arguing for retaining our PhD programmes at the current levels."*

The ERC fund was widely acknowledged as a **significant driver of improvements in research culture** by 21 of the 25 institutions interviewed. All institutions reported that the fund has provided essential support for fostering positive research culture, with some describing it as a "gamechanger."

A representative from one institution noted that "79% of the projects would not have taken place at all" without this fund and "21% would have taken place to a lesser extent", while other representatives indicated that the fund allowed them to accelerate initiatives that would have otherwise proceeded more slowly or on a smaller scale. Another said that in the absence of the funds they would not have been able to implement activities as quickly and effectively.

The scale and focus of these investments varied significantly depending on each institution's strategic priorities and budgetary constraints. For example, not all institutions reported using SIRF to bridge staff salaries, with some preferring to allocate funds towards seed funding or overhead costs.

Very large and very research-intensive institutions (KEF clusters V): Receive relatively larger sums of ERC and have the scale to run institution-wide research culture programmes. For example, one institution with more than 5,000 academic staff reported that, despite cultural change being difficult to effect in large organisations, SIRF has had "immediate effects" because it funded a cross-university ECR network and a series of micro-grants for department-led culture projects.

Large, high research-intensive / mid-sized teaching focused institutions (KEF clusters X, J, M): Use ERC and QR for targeted, smaller-scale initiatives. ERC allocations are often modest and sometimes pre-committed to coordination/capacity posts, limiting institution-wide reach.

Two teaching-led institutions (KEF clusters J and M) indicated that they used SIRF primarily to address funding shortfalls or maintain existing infrastructure (e.g. investment in IT systems, equipment and organisational infrastructure that underpin research activity). The funding sustains core capacity rather than expanding or diversifying it.

Six institutions, mainly large research-intensive and mid-sized institutions, cautioned that culture change is inherently multi-year. They report modest, early-stage shifts, however it is too early within current funding cycles to evidence institution-wide change attributable to SIRF. It was also commented that the long-term impact of SIRF remains uncertain due to the difficulty in measuring cultural shifts.

3.6 Valued features of SIRF

There are several standout features of SIRF that apply across all institution types. Institutions value individual funding streams and use the funding for a range of purposes. For example, mainstream QR is valued because this provides institutions with strategic autonomy to invest, amongst other areas, in core research activities. QR RDP is valued because this enables

institutions to support training and supervision of postgraduate students and thereby support the future talent pipeline.

3.6.1 Flexibility

Non-hypothecated funding: This allows institutions to allocate funds where they are most needed, whether for new strategic initiatives or for bridging strategic funding gaps.

Ability to 'top-slice' or devolve: Institutions can reserve funds for strategic initiatives or devolve to departments for tailored use.

Enables rapid response: SIRF enables institutions to respond more dynamically than is typically possible via competitive research grant routes. Institutions can quickly deploy resources to urgent or emerging research needs (e.g., COVID-19, AI, regional priorities).

> *"We've seen our research bidding go up from £15 million in 2021 to £35 million now… as a direct consequence of how we've been able to reinvest QR."*

3.6.2 Stability

Recurrent, predictable allocations: Institutions can plan strategically, invest in long-term projects, and respond quickly to emerging opportunities or crises.

Reliable funding base: SIRF allows the **continuation of existing and evolving research strands.** It provides a stable foundation that underpins research capacity, infrastructure, and staff retention, even when other income streams fluctuate or do not cover the full cost of research.

Supports continuity: Enables institutions to maintain research environments, retain key staff, and avoid disruptive stop–start cycles. This means that research activity can continue whilst transitioning between fixed-term grant funding and by ensuring researchers can be retained until the end of research projects without having to prematurely take up alternative funding.

> *"Where some of the main funders don't provide the full cost of the research, then the QR funding will allow heads of departments to invest in opportunities and people in a way that they wouldn't be able to do if they didn't have QR".*
>
> *"Without SIRF, we would hardly be doing any research – it is the glue that holds everything together".*

3.6.3 Strategic autonomy

Institutional discretion: Institutions have the autonomy to align SIRF spending with their own strategies, strengths, and local/national priorities, and in consideration of financial pressures.

Incentivisation of excellence: Departments have a clear line-of-sight between performance and resources, improvements in outputs, environment and impact translate into the next-year budget.

> *"We're absolutely pushed [financially]. (…) Research is one of our central missions, so we'll keep prioritising that."*
>
> *"The advantage of our recurrent QR funding is that we have a broad institutional strategy that we're reporting against, but that can evolve over time. We're not feeling like we're being held to something that by the end of that is five years old. Things externally have changed so profoundly in five years."*

3.6.4 Catalytic role

Pump-priming and leverage: SIRF is often used to seed new research, pilot high-risk ideas, or provide match funding that unlocks much larger external grants and partnerships.

> *"We also got [funding] from BBSRC and Innovate UK, half from companies. … That was at least part funded through SIRF. So those sorts of things bring really strong return on investment."*
>
> *"The Participatory Research Funding has really enabled us to take forward a more proactive and strategic approach to how we support public engagement and involvement in research. It has allowed us to seed fund certain activities."*

3.6.5 Targeted innovation

Invest in high impact research: The flexibility and stability of SIRF lets institutions invest in emerging, high-impact areas. Six interviewees described directing the grant towards global-challenge themes, new research platforms and other long-term bets, confident they could absorb risk because the funding is both predictable and untied.

Ring-fenced funds: These allow institutions to pilot new approaches to support research culture, participatory research, and policy engagement—areas that are often underfunded by project grants.

> *"Funding helped give 'a voice to those who otherwise wouldn't have had it, to do new culture-building activities.'"*

4 Summary of findings

This evaluation finds that **SIRF is a vital component of the English research funding landscape**. SIRF plays a crucial role in supporting the strategic development of research activities in English institutions. SIRF provides stable and flexible funding that complements competitive grant funding. It enables institutions to **invest in high-quality research**, **world class expertise**, **people and teams**, **the development of research capabilities** and **building impactful collaborations and partnerships**.

Drawing on the evidence set out in Section 3, alongside evidence extracted from the public domain (as set out in A.5), five themes have been identified which consolidate evaluation findings to the SIRF ToC (Section 2.3). These themes are:

- strategic agility and responsiveness. ToC objective **Strategic Priorities**
- enable research excellence. ToC objective **Enable Research Excellence**
- investment in Infrastructure. ToC objective Enable Research Excellence and Contribute towards Research Sustainability
- collaborations and leveraging funding. ToC objective Enable Research Excellence and Contribute towards Research Sustainability
- support for people, skills and culture. ToC objective **Supporting a healthy research sector**

As set out in Section 3, the uses and impacts of SIRF often cut across multiple objectives identified in the Theory of Change, and this has been captured in the paragraph above.

4.1 Strategic agility and responsiveness

Objective	SIRF streams	Institution outputs	Short-term outcomes	Medium term outcomes
Address strategic priorities	SIRF	Research strategy; stakeholder engagement	Strategic priority research; agility of funding deployment	Capacity to respond to emerging needs

External/mediating factors: Where SIRF is diverted to stabilise core operations, the ToC anticipates weaker flow along the 'novel/high-risk research' and 'regional responsiveness' pathways, tempering those outcomes.

The findings of this evaluation reinforce several hypotheses presented in the ToC for how SIRF supports the strategic ability and responsiveness of institutional research activities and challenges others.

The stability and flexibility of SIRF is used to support institutions in their strategic planning, particularly as total QR funding offers a predictable, recurrent allocation. Institutions have autonomy to determine how funding is used, and the evidence presents a high level of diversity in how institutions internally allocate and manage funds. Activities varied across the sample of

institutions, but **all institutions highlighted the importance of the stability and flexibility of SIRF in enabling research activities**. Flexibility is a key feature of SIRF and allows institutions to utilise funding in ways that address their specific needs and leverage their unique strengths, rather than adopting a 'one size fits all' approach. For example, where there are increases in financial instability externally, funds may be prioritised to maintain stability in existing structures (overheads and general cash flow) rather than more bold new investments. The extent to which these tensions are changing and have influenced decision-making internally remains to be explored in further depth.

Some institutions see SIRF streams (particularly QR business, QR charity and RCIF) as potential contributors to ambitious, capital-intensive projects, **but the evidence suggests that, although indispensable, the scale of funding is not always sufficient for these purposes**. This is largely due to competing priorities such as extensive estate backlogs, or day-to-day overhead needs. Where their ability to commit large amounts of funding upfront is limited, institutions are also less able to invest in initiatives that address nationally or institutionally strategically important ambitions, and/or to leverage funds from private parties.

SIRF influences the direction of research performed by English institutions in various ways. Firstly, institutions' ability to choose how they direct their SIRF based on their internal assessment of potential strategic value could inform what research capabilities are invested in across the ecosystem. This in turn could inform where England's R&D capabilities develop. Secondly, the availability of SIRF could support institutions to build their own capabilities around existing global, national and local challenges and R&D needs. The existence of both causal pathways is supported by the evidence to some extent, and they are not mutually exclusive. Further investigation is needed to understand how internal and decision-making factors influence prioritisation of one research activity over the other.

Ring-fenced funds enable institutions to focus on research culture, participatory research and policy related activities. Whilst some institutions described these pots as insufficient to create strategic impact, they were nonetheless **essential in ensuring such research activities happened at all**. For example, the PSF supported institutions to create impactful research by linking policy makers with researchers. However, direct impact was hard to capture, as funding was often spread thinly to maximise participation.

4.2 Enable research excellence

Objective	SIRF streams	Institution outputs	Short term outcomes	Medium term outcomes
Enable research excellence	QR streams	Research ideas and activity; infrastructure; research culture and environment; talent development	Research output quality and novelty; Researcher career progression and retention	Quality and diversity of research staff and translation capacity; increased attractiveness of R&I investment in English institutions; more areas of strategic global advantage are developed in England

Objective	SIRF streams	Institution outputs	Short term outcomes	Medium term outcomes

External/mediating factors: The pressure to cover the fEC of research influences the direction of capability building.

The analysis provides evidence that **supports the ToC hypotheses that SIRF enables research excellence via various causal pathways and across the funding streams**. SIRF is used as a catalyst and underpins all research activities, supporting infrastructure and environment and culture which further enable high quality research outputs and impact. Some institutions specifically highlighted that, without SIRF, research would be impossible to undertake.

Evidence suggests that not all institutions were able to invest in curiosity-driven research, as current institutional priorities focus on covering essential overheads of programmes aligned with institutional strategies. As a result of the current financial pressures, SIRF is being spread too thinly within most institutions to enable genuine “blue skies research”. Nevertheless, SIRF was described as vital in supporting activities related to the testing of unproven concepts, establishing interdisciplinary centres, or generating proof of concept results. **SIRF both directly and indirectly supports the performance of research activity that would not have happened otherwise or, at least in the same timeframe**. It is used to fund and incentivise new research projects, such as through seed funding.

Analysis provided additional insights on how SIRF can be used to enhance the translation of research, including in ways that were not explicitly captured by the programme's ToC. Causal pathways in the ToC hypothesise that specific ring-fenced funding and QR would be used to support more stakeholder-focused research and leverage investment from industry to collaborate on commercially relevant research. However, institutions highlighted that they have also used SIRF to support commercialisation activity more directly and intentionally, for instance by funding translational research and spinout activity. Evidence suggests **SIRF underpins engagement infrastructure, helping institutions deliver research with societal and economic impact**.

4.3 Investment in infrastructure

Objective	SIRF streams	Institution outputs	Short term outcomes	Medium term outcomes
Enable research excellence: supporting infrastructure	SIRF / RCIF	Infrastructure maintenance and new facilities	Quality and availability of research infrastructure	Attractiveness of England for R&I investment; regional capability

External/mediating factors: Constraints in the scale and operational funding for infrastructure limit advancement

Due to the extent of capital investment required for infrastructure projects, the availability of other funding sources for infrastructure is especially relevant to how institutions use RCIF (and QR), affecting how it is allocated, what it is used for, and its potential impact. **RCIF was described as invaluable for sustaining and enhancing research infrastructure**, but institutions noted that the funding required to maintain their estates was much larger than their RCIF allocation.

All institutions (but especially those receiving relatively smaller amounts of RCIF), often prioritised RCIF for maintenance costs rather than investing in major developments. This is primarily due to growing demands on infrastructure budgets from estate maintenance backlogs and necessary enhancements for existing facilities such as decarbonisation and digital infrastructure. Whilst some institutions did use RCIF for large scale multi-million-pound projects, additional external funding was needed alongside RCIF.

There is limited evidence within this evaluation on the **equipment sharing and system cost efficiency** ToC pathway. A minority of institutions described attempts to share facilities but most highlighted operational barriers (e.g. insurance, charge out models, health and safety requirements, and scarce technical staff) that constrain feasibility and scale. No systematic data was collected on cost savings. This pathway therefore remains a plausible hypothesis rather than a substantiated output in the evidence set.

4.4 Collaborations and leveraging funding

Objective	SIRF streams	Institution outputs	Short term outcomes	Medium term outcomes
Contribute towards research sustainability; Enable research excellence	SIRF	Engagement activities with charities, business, communities (including co-pilots, consortia, pilot activities, dedicated innovation hubs etc.); talent development activities; investment incentives; new partnerships (including regional collaborations); stakeholder engagement (including co-produced research) and network building; studentships and supervision	Working environment; progression and retention; diversity of PGRs; increased leveraged investment, increased and maintained collaboration with charities, business, communities; research translation, including through spin-out activity and commercialisation; policymaker uptake of research findings.	Effective translation research; greater sector attractiveness; increased industry, charity investment and participation in R&D, expanded networks, strengthened reputational capital.

External/mediating factors: For smaller allocations, the ToC predicts more limited benefits because inputs at the start of the pathway are constrained, reducing downstream leverage.

SIRF plays a key role in facilitating collaboration, fostering partnerships and enabling institutions to leverage further funding from industry, government and other organisations, often contributing to de-risking early-stage research through external investment. SIRF supports both existing, long-standing partnerships and collaborations, as well as leveraging new partnerships.

Many institutions found it difficult to attribute partnerships and collaborations directly to SIRF, as it was often combined with other funding. Nevertheless, it was clear that SIRF provided, at a minimum, a supporting role in institutional partnership and collaborative research activity. **SIRF was therefore seen as a catalyst for facilitating collaboration and partnerships, rather than**

a sole contributor. Institutions use SIRF to invest in initial and recurring engagement with industry and large-scale research networks to leverage future collaborations, or pump-prime relationships.

The application of SIRF in developing collaborations and leveraging funding reinforces the complexity and existence of feedback loops within the programme's causal pathways. For example, the use of SIRF to support excellence in research attracts further opportunities for collaboration, which in turn generate valuable opportunities for impactful and strategically important research.

4.5 Support for people, skills, and culture

Objective	SIRF streams	Institution outputs	Short term outcomes	Medium term outcomes
Support a healthy research sector	SIRF	Research culture and environment; talent development; studentships and supervision	Working environment; progression and retention; diversity of PGRs; increased research culture, working environment.	Diversity and quality of research staff; increased attractiveness of English for R&D talent; increased number, diversity, quality of research staff.

External/mediating factors: Where SIRF is used to retain existing people rather than expand, the ToC expects benefits in stability and culture, but a slower buildup towards the longer-term workforce outcomes.

The evidence supports the theory that SIRF is used to support the development of people, skills and research culture across the sector. Institutions use a combination of SIRF, including mainstream QR, QR RDP and ERC to support people, skills and research culture. This **investment of SIRF ultimately contributes to a healthy research sector.**

The evidence illustrates that SIRF is used to facilitate the development, career progression and retention of research talent within English institutions. Evidence suggests that SIRF is used to fill gaps that emerge through unstable contracts (staff and maintenance) and the quality of the environments that support early career researchers. By providing better accessibility and opportunities for individuals, this strategic allocation of funding helps retain the diversity of the workforce.

SIRF is used to **support investment in new talent** where external funding is not always sufficient, for example, by directly funding studentships and relevant supervision costs. SIRF plays a **critical role in supporting the talent pipeline.** QR RDP funding was described as essential for covering the costs of supervision and training and indirectly supports career progression. It plays a key role in leveraging additional funding, such as match-funding studentships.

SIRF has also been used to improve research environments, and promote inclusion, through activities aimed at the wider workforce and, in some cases, via reasonable adjustments and targeted support for researchers from underrepresented groups. Examples include assistive technology suites, laboratory adjustments, BSL interpretation, hardship bursaries, and counselling.

While participants often valued these initiatives, their **specific effects on diversity and inclusion are difficult to isolate in a complex system**.

ERC is seen as a critical catalyst for faster and more visible cultural change. Institutions funded initiatives that would not have been supported to the same extent if the ERC funding. Although some cultural changes are already evident in some institutions as a result of ERC, many initiatives are in their early stages, and institutional cultural changes are not anticipated for another few years. Some initiatives include open research hubs with training and tool kits, research ethics teams, research networks and mid-career accelerator fellowships.

5 Conclusion and observations

Over the past decade, the overall reporting on cost recovery on research activities indicates it is in decline. For Research Council projects, average recovery reporting was under 70% in 2021/22. Amidst indicators of worsening cost recovery of research, rising research costs and external challenges, institutions are having to shift strategic investment of mainstream QR into continuing research operations, and covering fEC. The way in which SIRF, and particularly QR, is used is therefore changing and institutions are using a greater proportion of their non-hypothecated funding, or other income, to cover the full economic costs of project grants funding, or other income, to cover the full economic costs of project grants. Consequently, the financing of research is increasingly stretched. While SIRF still underpins research excellence, reduced discretionary headroom limits capacity to sustain and develop people, facilities and high-risk/early-stage work, prompting concern that SIRF's inherent underpinning value is being eroded over time, not because its purpose has changed, but because gaps have grown relative to allocations.

A.1.4The evidence gathered in this report shows that SIRF contributes to the objectives set out in the ToC for SIRF:

- **address strategic priorities**: facilitating research responses to current and emerging local, national and global challenges
- **enable research excellence**: supporting infrastructure, environment, culture and funding flexibility to enable high-quality research outputs and impact
- **contribute towards research sustainability**: enabling long-term financial and strategic planning
- **support a healthy research sector:** supporting the wide range of institutions, research disciplines and missions

Although this report has exposed the complexities in evaluating unhypothecated funding, it is appropriate to conclude that **SIRF is a cornerstone of the English Higher Education funding landscape**. Its flexibility allows institutions to support a healthy research environment where curiosity-driven research and impactful collaborations can thrive; the stability of SIRF also enables institutions to in invest in ambitious, longer-term, strategic priorities, and is a critical component of ensuring financial sustainability across the sector.

The complementary nature of SIRF enhances England's research ecosystem, supporting the maintenance of high-quality research environments and enabling institutions to respond to emerging opportunities. **Mainstream QR and other non-hypothecated SIRF underpins a diversity of research** activities that are fundamental to the sustainability and growth of research. The ring-fenced funds spark research culture-related, participatory and policy engagement activity that may otherwise not be prioritised.

Drawing on the evidence and the summary of findings set out in this report, we have made a series of observations, as listed below.

Key observation 1. SIRF's flexibility and stability are crucial for institutions' ability to plan and invest in long-term research strategies. This evaluation highlights the benefits of flexible, non-hypothecated funding and how this allow institutions to allocate resources according to their strategic priorities.

Key observation 2. Institutions value the ring-fenced funding, as these instruments provide helpful direction and signalling of priorities. The continuity of these instruments could be better signposted to increase their reliability, help institutions forward-plan, and thus maximise their ability to leverage funding.

Key observation 3. SIRF is critical to maintaining England's strength and leadership in research - it helps ensure that institutions' research activities are sufficiently resourced. Representatives of institutions have spoken extensively about the financial challenges they are navigating, and recent reports stress that some institutions will need to change their funding model "to avoid facing a material risk of closure.[9]"

Key observation 4. Further evidencing of how, and the extent to which SIRF (at different levels of scale) enables sharing facilities, equipment, and functions is required to understand efficiencies. The ToC assumes that one of the outputs from SIRF is cost efficiency. Evidence underpinning this specific output has not been collected. Identifying these and/or other mechanisms for improving efficient use of funding could help establish best practices for achieving further value for money.

Key observation 5. The evidence highlights continued need to invest in infrastructure to ensure that institutions have the state-of-the-art facilities needed to conduct cutting-edge research, attract talent, and unlock additional benefits like new partnerships. RCIF helps institutions keep a competitive edge by maintaining their infrastructure, which often requires substantial investment, especially when equipment or estates reach the end of their lifecycle. Across the board, institutions noted infrastructure investment backlogs, emphasising the critical role played by RCIF. Further understanding of how RCIF interacts with other funding has not been set out as part of this evaluation and would lead to a greater understanding of how institutions manage capital funding to maintain and develop their research infrastructure.

5.1 Next steps

Research England is currently carrying out an extensive review of its strategic research funding allocated to English institutions. This impact and evaluation report provides one source of evidence – part of a wider 'jigsaw' – that will feed into a longer-term programme of analysis and development.

The evaluation will support Research England in considering how strategic research funding has worked in practice and how it may continue to evolve. We look forward to seeing how this evidence is used alongside other inputs as funding and policy develop over the coming period.

[9] Financial sustainability of higher education providers in England: 2024. See also Office for Students annual report and accounts 2024-2025

Appendix

A.1. Theory of Change for SIRF

A.1.1.Components of the Theory of Change

A ToC represents the causal logic of a programme, what it achieves, and how it does so through narrative and diagrammatic elements. The ToC diagram is intended to be read sequentially from left to right, but it is not intended to imply a simple linear progression between these components.

The main causal components of the SIRF ToC are:

Inputs: the resources, contributions and investments that go into the programme. Examples include funding, staff, time, equipment, and materials, but for SIRF, inputs are primarily monetary. Inputs have been depicted as streams of SIRF ("SIRF streams").

Activities: the actions, processes, techniques and events that are implemented to bring about desired changes. For SIRF, activities have been defined as the approaches to distributing funds taken by the institutions following their allocations received from RE. Depending on the operating model used, allocation decisions and overall management of the funds may be devolved at different levels (e.g., school, faculty) within the institution, adding further complexity to the model of how SIRF works.

Outputs: the direct products or deliverables of the programme activities. They are often quantifiable and can include the number of workshops conducted, participants served, or materials distributed. For SIRF, outputs have been distinguished by the allocation process ('institution allocation activity') and the initiative or other investment which captures how recipient institutions spend their SIRF ('institution outputs'). This approach has been chosen to ensure that the ToC represents the two critical steps of institutional SIRF usage: 1) decision-making for allocation; and 2) the resultant activity based on the internal allocation. Both form critical parts of the programme's causal logic.

Outcomes: the specific changes or benefits that result from the programme. A delineation has been made between short- and medium-term outcomes.

Short-term outcomes: the changes expected to occur immediately or in the near-term. For SIRF, these include changes in immediate research, recruitment practices, increased knowledge or awareness and behavioural change.

Medium-term outcomes: changes that occur after some time, such as modified behaviours or practices. For SIRF, these include wider changes in the system resulting from the short-term outcome changes, such as national and regional research capability, attractiveness, and investment.

Impacts (also called long-term outcomes): the changes that the programme is expected to deliver in the long term, such as increased excellence in research. These are often the ultimate results that a programme aims to achieve as outlined in the programme's objectives, such as sustainable excellence in the research system.

The ToC also includes the following information that inform the causal pathways:

Assumptions: the conditions that are necessary for proposed causal pathways to hold and, therefore, for the programme to succeed. They include assumptions about the resources, the implementation process, and the external environment. They are conditions believed to already exist within the system.

External and mediating factors: the environmental conditions, events, or contexts that can influence the programme's success. They include economic conditions, political climate, and societal and cultural factors.

A.1.2.Change pathways

Multiple theorised change pathways can be identified using the ToC that explain the different mechanisms through which SIRF leads to outcomes and, ultimately, impacts to the wider system. It is these causal mechanisms that have been tested through in-depth conversations with institutions as part of the research.

A list of the key ToC causal pathways and their accompanying assumptions are presented in Appendix A.1. with a high-level narrative summary of the main causal mechanism associated with each Objective summarised below.

A.1.2.1. Allocation approaches

The non-hypothecated nature of many SIRF streams, including mainstream QR funding, provides a high degree of flexibility in terms of how funding is allocated within institutions. The models by which institutions allocate and manage the funding they receive ranges from a centralised approach through to a devolved approach. Decisions that affect the allocation volume, conditions, and mechanisms of funds are made at various levels and affect where and how the funds are used. Allocation decisions are shaped by factors including the academic structure and business operating model of each institution. Thus, there are varying degrees of heterogeneity across institutions in how SIRF streams are allocated, based on the model adopted. Even where SIRF streams have ring-fenced conditions that determine for what purposes they are used (e.g., ERC and PSF), the detailed decisions for how and where these funds were used was still determined by the institution.

A.1.2.2.Causal pathways

This section explains the expected pathways to delivering the various impacts required.

Objective 1: Address strategic priorities

Through SIRF, institutions are assumed to be able to commit to long-term investment in areas such as infrastructure, talent development, and engagement with local stakeholder communities. This results in increased capacity and capability to deliver high-quality research and impact, enabling the institution to address its strategic priorities and objectives in a way that reflects local, regional and national priorities. It also enables institutions to contribute to and leverage their strategic position to support R&D in the local community and build economic and societal value in their local communities and beyond.

Objective 2: Enable research excellence

SIRF is assumed to enhance research excellence in institutions in England. Institutions are able to allocate funds for projects and research activity through a number of internal mechanisms. For

example, institutions can use SIRF for seed funding and bridging support, infrastructure and talent institutions empower researchers to pursue innovative projects that address pressing societal challenges. SIRF is often used when external funding is unavailable.

Objective 3: Contribute towards research sustainability and support a healthy research sector

SIRF is assumed to provide a stable funding source that allows institutions to plan effectively and maintain aspects of their research environment in order to retain research capabilities in the face of wider economic constraints. The ability to invest in local, regional and national emerging priorities also encourages and enables further investment to be leveraged from industry and other sources from outside the UK government.

A.1.2.3.Incentive mechanisms

The REF rewards institutional investment into activities that underpin, support and fulfil high quality, impactful and excellent research. Further, REF incentivises (and will further drive this in future exercises) healthy and resilient research cultures and environments that underpin research excellence. SIRF is also available to use towards activities that support these outcomes, therefore incentivising institution to invest to increase their REF performance. This can be reflected in increases in related SIRF stream allocations where their formulae include volume and quality REF-related outputs

A.1.2.4.External and mediating factors

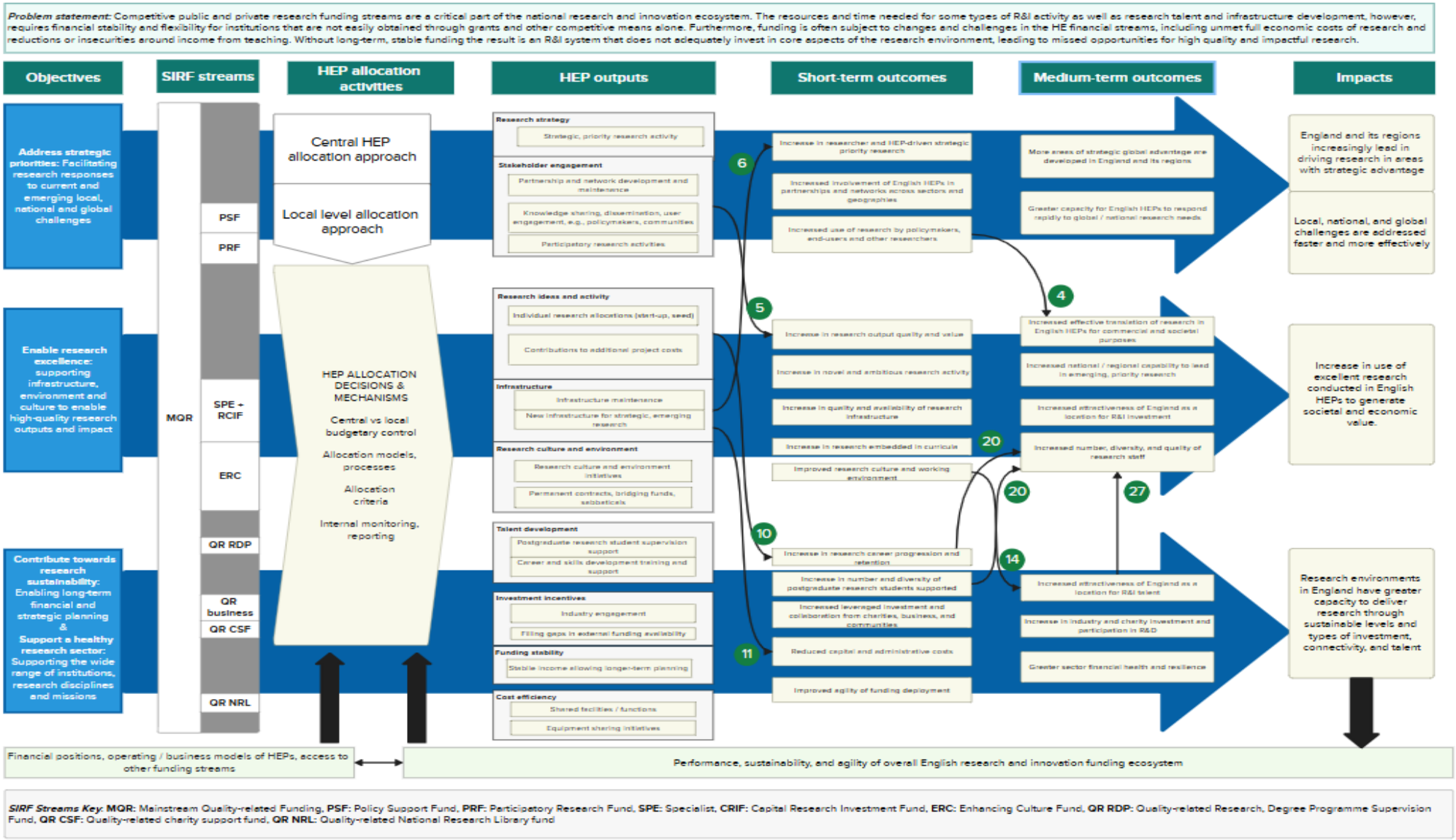
The ToC also includes a set of external and mediating factors that have the potential to shape the way the causal pathways described above are likely to play out. These include:

- **The higher education and R&I funding environment**. Institutions' use of SIRF is likely to be impacted by the availability and focus of other funding, including project-specific grants from public and private sectors, alongside developments in institutions other revenue generation activities. Increases in focused funding opportunities can create leverage for SIRF (and vice versa, as is described in the causal statements). However, funding gaps and differential recovery rates in competitive funding across sectors may shape decisions around directing portions of SIRF to supplement project-specific funding, to maintain baseline institution activities and services. In addition to how they use SIRF, the wider financial environment can affect how much of SIRF an institution receives by affecting the overall size of the pot and impacting factors that determine individual institutional allocation.
- **Strategic policy developments**. Evolutions in the external policy space, including higher education policy, R&D policies, industrial policy, and domain-specific policies related to institutions target disciplines, can influence institutions behaviours. Internal priorities and strategic direction set by the institutions themselves will also affect how they use and allocate SIRF.
- **Features of the stakeholder ecosystem within which institutions operate**. Evolutions within the institutions stakeholder networks (including the relationships with public, private, and third sector partners) may influence the impact of SIRF allocations toward research activities (such as idea generation, research collaboration, feedback, and dissemination), as well as broader user and public engagement activities, commercialisation and translation, and policy influence.
- **Infrastructure and supply chains.** The infrastructure and supply chains associated with institutions knowledge production activities include physical infrastructure (such as laboratories,

workspaces), digital infrastructure (national and global IT systems, datasets, processing capacity), as well as the talent supply chain. Developments in these supply chain areas can influence institutions capacity to pursue and achieve outcomes related to the strategic use of SIRF.

A.1.3. Initial Theory of Change diagram

Figure 4: SIRF programme initial Theory of Change visualisation



A.1.4. Reflections on evidence and updates to the SIRF ToC

The complexity of how SIRF works and how it is used across the sector. The evidence reinforces the theory that there is substantial diversity in how institutions use SIRF, both in terms of their objectives for its use, and the methods by which institutions allocate funding. Considerations are:

- Understanding how SIRF can provide value in different contexts, through various pathways in different types of institutions will be key to understanding how SIRF can be best utilised.
- The ToC needs to factor in the contextual variation that exists, alongside the diversity in usage and mechanisms employed to allocate funding, alongside the outcomes and impacts that can be generated in each situation.
- Recognising contextual variation enables setting more nuanced expectations for what constitutes effective and impactful use of SIRF in different settings. This would also allow identifying which mechanisms offer the greatest potential value for each unique context.

Variation in timelines and size of SIRF streams affect their allocation within institutions. Some streams of SIRF (in particular the ring-fenced funds) are characterised by short time horizons and application turnaround times, which means that institutions need to take a short-term approach to how they deploy them. Similarly, the 'relatively modest' size of the ring-fenced funding sometimes means it cannot be leveraged for large-scale, cultural impacts.

The relationship of SIRF to other funding mechanisms is critical in how it is used by institutions. By its nature, SIRF underpins and is typically combined with other funding sources. The flexibility and stability provided by SIRF is a benefit for institutions, but it makes it challenging for policy makers to untangle the contributions of each individual stream to longer-term impact. As such, the evidence gathered from interviews with institutions does not allow confirmation as to whether SIRF has directly led to long-term socioeconomic impacts beyond the R&I system.

- Where such positive impacts have been identified, such as using funding to address local, national, and global challenges, institutions' use of SIRF is primarily seen as one of many contributing factors, including external funding sources.
- Therefore, the role and perceived value of SIRF may vary, depending on the investment purpose and an institution's access to other funds.

The mechanism of 'buying' staff time is often utilised and cuts across various uses of SIRF. One of the major mechanisms that was emphasised in the evidence was the ability to use SIRF, and especially QR, to 'buy-out' or match staff time, allowing them to engage in activities that are not covered by external funding.

- Institution allocation decisions and models are a core part of the causal model and its influence on the programme's potential outcomes and impacts.

The research investments made by institutions receiving SIRF can vary in their relevance to wider system goals. The evaluation suggests a complex picture when it comes to institutions' use of SIRF to support strategic research areas.

Some institutions provided examples where SIRF allowed them to expand their activity in **new areas** which aligned with **broader funding opportunities and research priorities**.

In contrast, some interviewees highlighted that SIRF can be used to support researchers to pursue opportunities and topics that are **outside of current priority areas,** but that have the potential to leverage future external funding.

This suggests SIRF often enables institutions to pursue strategic research activities that are aligned with broader priorities within the system, but also to focus on wider-reaching, emerging priorities.

REF can play a critical role in determining what institutions count as strategically important for SIRF. Externally, RE allocates QR with regard to REF-assessed quality, volume and relative cost, which sets each institution's envelope. Internally, many (research intensive and other) institutions reference recent REF results and criteria (outputs, environment, impact) when distributing SIRF - prioritising people & culture, shared infrastructure, and impact/KE capacity in areas of strength or targeted growth and addressing weaker UoAs.

Financially supporting what REF processes recognise as 'excellent' has potential implications for the type of research that is able to thrive in institutions.

A.1.5.Causal pathway statements and assumptions

The initial ToC was developed prior to data collection along with the following causal pathway statement and assumptions.

As indicated in the diagram above, many elements of the causal pathways interact with each other, including between the objectives. For example, an activity or short-term outcome associated with Objective 1 may lead to medium-term outcomes or impacts associated with both Objective 1 and Objective 2. Therefore, the causal pathway statements are presented by the programme objectives outlined above and grouped based on where most of the change occurs, and they should not be interpreted as telling us only about the objective they are grouped under. The implications for the evaluation are that evidence on individual activities will need to be considered under multiple potential impacts related to the objectives. Causal pathway statements and assumptions aim to make it clear where the most significant changes from each activity are anticipated to occur.

Allocation to outputs

#	Causal pathway statements	Assumptions
1	**If** institutions receive flexible block grant research funding and/or ring-fenced funds **then** they can select where to allocate the funds in a way that addresses priority needs for that institution's R&I environment **because** the institution has the confidence to invest flexibly, patiently, and sustainably due to greater resilience in the face of external pressures on institutional finances	Assumes effective, efficient, and fair allocation processes within institutions and across schools/departments.

Outputs to short-term and medium-term outcomes

Objective 1: Address strategic priorities

#	Causal pathway statements	Assumptions
2	**If** institutions invest in research that aligns with their institutional strategies and priorities **then** they will have increased capacity and capability to deliver high-quality contributions to research and impact **because** they can build long-term and tailored strategic approaches to research capacity development and delivery, leading to more effective value added.	Assumes institutions are aware of where investments in research activity can add the most value (whether nationally, locally, or globally) Assumes institutions research strategies differ from, and therefore add value to, activity that can be funded by other means (e.g., competitive grants)
3	**If** institutions allocate funds according to strategic priorities and long-term investments (e.g., infrastructure, talent, niche or emerging research areas) **then** they are better able to respond to emerging opportunities of national or local strategic importance or advantage **because** such funds may not be accessible to the institution through other sources (including via competitive grants), and sustainable investment will allow the development of critical capacity in new or emerging fields.	Assumes that institutions have sufficient insight into opportunities for national or local strategic advantage Assumes that funds from other sources are insufficient (in amount, duration, conditions, flexibility) to drive capacity building in these emerging areas Assumes that institutions invest effectively to develop capacity for strategic advantage (either directly through supporting research or indirectly by leveraging and attracting investment)
4	**IF** institutions invest in initiatives and facilities that facilitate knowledge sharing, including user, public, community, and policymaker engagement **then** institutions can deliver more impactful research because user insights can effectively shape the direction and communications of research **and/or because** engagement will lead to greater opportunities for translation in national and local policy and practice.	Assumes adequate awareness and capacity to use the facilities by relevant external users Assumes facility usage leads to sharing or generation of new knowledge Assumes that knowledge sharing leads to increased impact for institutions' research Assumes engagement leads to changes in understanding, attitude, or behaviour in the policymaker and/or researchers which in turn changes how they engage with each other for their future work Assumes policymakers more effectively use research when developing policies and services AND/OR assumes researchers' research activities or communications change Assumes the research-informed policy has greater economic or societal impact than policies developed without the input of the institution's research/evidence

5	**If** institutions progress their own research strategies and priorities through projects and partnerships **then** they will have increased capacity and capability to deliver high-quality contributions to research and impact **because** the development of cross-sector, interdisciplinary, and international networks and partnerships will result in increased access to expertise, resources, and collaboration opportunities.	Assumes investment in networks and partnerships leads to enhancements in the strength, quality, and/or longevity of the relationship. Assumes the network/partnership allows research activity to happen that would not have otherwise happened, at least to the same level of quality and speed Assumes the research resulting from the network/partnership generates impact that could not have occurred from other sources, at least to the same extent or speed
6	**If** institutions invest in capital assets for strategic research purposes, including in fields where they have existing capabilities, that are emerging, or that are a local, national, or global priority **then** they will have the capacity to produce more high-quality contributions to research and impact **because** they will be able to perform cutting-edge research at scale and attract further investment.	Assumes that institutions can effectively identify opportunities to address strategic institutional/ local/ national/ global priorities Assumes the infrastructure allows for research of a type, scale, or timeframe that would not have happened otherwise Assumes the research performed as a result of this infrastructure is high quality and cutting edge. Assumes the research performed as a result of this infrastructure contributes to the development/growth of the institution's/location's/nation's capacity and capability within that field
7	**If** institutions strategically reserve portions of non-hypothecated funds, **then** the research system can respond to current and future national and global challenges more rapidly **because** institutions can deploy targeted resources to priority research without needing to wait for funding cycles.	Assumes that opportunities for institutions to respond to challenges exist (i.e., that emerging challenges exist) Assumes that institutions can identify opportunities to effectively use their research capacities to address challenges Assumes that internal institutional allocation of SIRF can be rapid and adaptable Assumes capacity and flexibility of staff and facilities to work on emerging challenges. Assumes that the funded institution research effectively addresses the challenge, reducing its negative societal and/or economic impact

8	**If** institutions use flexible non-hypothecated funding to cover the overhead and engagement costs of charity organisations **then** they can carry out more research activity with increased or unique societal relevance **because** charities are less able to cover the costs required for funding research at scale compared to other funders, especially when facing challenging external financial pressures.	Assumes that charities would not cover the full costs of funding in the absence of SIRF Assumes that charity funding leads to research that would not be generated through other means in the same timeframe. Assumes that charity funded research is associated with higher or more rapid societal impact (than research from other sources)

Objective 2: Enable research excellence

#	Causal pathway statements	Assumptions
9	**If** institutions allocate SIRF to support researchers' time (e.g., through sabbaticals, seed funding, start-up funding, bridging funding) **then** English institutions will produce diverse, innovative and impactful research **because** researchers are able to identify and develop novel ways of addressing some of the biggest challenges that may not come with immediate external investment or commercialisation opportunities.	Assumes that the research ideas funded are those that are novel or innovative research that would not have been funded (or at least to the same extent) through other means, e.g., competitive grants Assumes that the funding provided is sufficient to develop the research ideas into translation or at least externally fundable work
10	**If** institutions allocate SIRF to support researchers' time **then** English institutions can attract and retain more high-quality researcher talent **because** funding provides opportunities for researchers to do more of the research they want to do, leading to greater career progression and satisfaction.	Assumes that an adequate number of researchers are aware of and use the fund. Assumes that researchers who use the fund would not otherwise carry out the same research Assumes that performing the supported research has a substantial positive impact on their career progression and/or satisfaction Assumes that improved career progression and/or satisfaction leads to retention and attraction of high-quality researcher talent
11	**If** institutions allocate funding to supplement research projects, **then** high-quality contributions to research and knowledge are produced **because** researchers can undertake additional important research activity (such as testing assumptions and trialling different mechanisms) that enhances	Assumes additional funding could not have been received by other means e.g., grant extension Assumes additional activity increases the quality of the research

	ongoing research projects not covered by the grant due to limitations in external funding amount, duration, or conditions.	
12	**If** institutions invest in building, expanding and maintaining central physical and digital research infrastructure, **then** institutions will increase / maintain their capacity and capability to deliver high quality, impactful research **because** infrastructure attracts talent, investment, and collaboration opportunities.	Assumes talent and investors from outside English academia (e.g., industry, overseas) are aware of institutions' developments in infrastructure. Assumes that new / maintained infrastructure is perceived as being sufficiently important to sway decisions for investment, collaboration, or employment Assumes that the resulting investment, collaboration or employment leads to improvements in the UK's capacity and capability to deliver world-leading research
13	**If** institutions invest in the capital and staff required for specialist research, **then** English institutions will have increased capacity and capability to deliver impactful research **because** some specialist research comes with high overhead costs and is less likely to be conducted elsewhere at an equivalent scale **and/or because** establishing capacity in specialist research areas comes with high risk and high costs that some institutions, especially smaller ones, cannot otherwise cover.	Assumes specialist research would not be carried out elsewhere (nationally) without institutions and the SIRF support Assumes the specialist infrastructure leads to novel research that could not be carried out as effectively or efficiently without it Assumes specialist research using the infrastructure generates research that has unique societal or economic impact
14	**If** institutions invest in people, research culture and environment, including in policies and initiatives, **then** they will deliver higher quality work from a stronger base of researchers **because** they can provide a more supportive and inclusive working environment which will increase retention and/or productivity of those working in academia.	Assumes institution investment in research culture and environment leads to tangible, net improvements to the working environment for researchers, e.g., through improved policies and practices. Assumes improvements to the working environment would lead to changes in researcher attitudes and behaviour, in turn affecting research outputs Assumes changes to research outputs are net positives for research quality (and volume). Assumes that perceived improvements lead to sustained and significant increases in career satisfaction

		Assumes that greater career satisfaction leads to more high-quality talent staying in their careers (or at least as researchers) AND/OR assumes that improvements lead more high-quality researchers from outside academia to consider and join the workforce.
15	**If** institutions can use non-hypothecated funding to cover staff posts including permanent contracts, **then** there will be greater attraction and retention of high-quality researcher and research support staff **because** employees will experience stability and reduced financial pressure between fixed-term research contracts.	Assumes that institutional support for bridging or permanent contracts is not 'crowding out' investment into longer term contracts from research funders Assumes that the post funding support provides sufficiently improved perceptions of job stability Assumes that improved perceptions of job stability lead to retention and attraction of high-quality researcher and research support talent
16	**If** institutions use funds to cover the costs of staff research time, **then** they will attract higher-quality researcher talent **because** institutions have the financial sustainability to provide researcher with time to conduct the research, they are passionate about in addition to teaching.	Assumes that staff with protected research time use at least some of their remaining time to teach
17	**If** institutions use funds to cover the costs of staff research time, **then** they will support the development of future research talent **because** researchers will have time to take on teaching responsibilities where they can embed research into the curriculum and improve students' knowledge, understanding, and interest in research.	Assumes that staff with protected research time use at least some of their remaining time to teach Assumes that staff are able to effectively embed their research work into the curriculum Assumes that changes in curriculum leads to more interest and/or knowledge in research careers from students Assumes students with interest in research careers have sufficient capacity / ability to join and remain in (high quality) research careers

Objective 3: Contribute towards research sustainability and support a healthy research sector

#	Causal pathway statements	Assumptions
18	**If** institutions use funding to provide an effective and viable platform and access to expertise and resources, **then** more	Assumes that businesses are aware of and use institutions for their research

	research performed in the country will result in opportunities for commercially viable innovations **because** institutions can attract and leverage industry investment into the research system.	Assumes that institutions investment is effective in raising awareness of and/or improving attractiveness of their research offer for businesses
19	**If** institution use funds to invest in regular infrastructure maintenance, **then** the English research system will be more efficient **because** institutions can reduce the need for greater long-term costs of repairs or overhauls.	Assumes cost of maintenance is lower than cost of recreating equivalent aspects of the research environment Assumes that overhauls would not have resulted in greater benefits for the research system compared to maintaining older infrastructure
20	**If** targeted institution investment of funds in supervision of postgraduate research students, **then** increases in the amount of high-quality researcher talent in England **because** targeted availability to departments that have the capacity to deliver high-quality research **and/or because** a larger and more diverse population postgraduate research students can pursue research training by covering their cost of study where they might not otherwise be able to afford it	Assumes that the supervision fund either supports additional PGR student places and/or higher quality of experience for PGR Assumes that there is an increased volume and/or quality of skilled individuals at the end of their PGR training Assume at least some of postgraduates remain in academia, or at least in research, within England Assumes that research students supported by the fund would not have entered or remained in research careers without the PGR scheme
21	**If** institutions invest in skills and capacity development initiatives, **then** there will be increased high quality researcher and research support talent **because** staff will have access to greater career progression and satisfaction, leading to greater retention within academia.	Assumes that skills and capacity development initiatives are appropriately targeting gaps in current offerings for the institution's researcher and research support staff Assumes that those accessing the initiatives are those that would benefit from them Assumes that the initiatives lead to significant changes in participants' knowledge and/or attitudes EITHER Assumes that participants have the opportunity to apply the knowledge and/or attitudes into their current career (in the near-term) Assumes that participants' change in knowledge and behaviour leads to

		improvements to their career progression and career satisfaction AND/OR Assumes that participants' change in knowledge and behaviour leads to improvements to their collegiate behaviour Assumes that improvements in the collegiate behaviour of researchers and research staff leads to greater job satisfaction amongst colleagues Assumes a change to job / career satisfaction in researchers and research staff is sufficient to encourage them to remain (longer) in their careers
22	**If** institutions have access to stable funding, **then** the English research system will be more efficient because it provides institutions with stable and predictable levels of support over time, allowing for long-term planning and more effective resource allocation and/or **because** it allows institutions to maintain key aspects of their research environment (including staff, infrastructure, other prior commitments) in the face of potential short-term external challenges and/or because the stability reduces the need for as frequent grant applications and the associated administrative human resource needed for securing short-term or intermittent funding.	Assumes institutions are able to identify and allocate funding effectively and efficiently Assumes longer-term planning is more efficient and cost effective than short-term planning Assumes providing funds to retain existing aspects of the research environments does not disincentivise critical adaptation or taking advantage of new opportunities Assumes reduced administrative costs do not negatively affect allocation rigour and therefore research quality
23	**If** institutions use funds to develop or participate in equipment sharing initiatives, **then** the English research system will have enhanced physical and digital infrastructure and improved cost efficiencies **because** institutions will reduce their expenditure on costly equipment that is not efficiently used by researchers within individual institutions.	Assumes that equipment sharing provides institutions/researchers access to resources that would otherwise be unavailable Assumes that there is sufficient awareness and usage of equipment sharing initiatives among potential users Assumes that equipment sharing leads to net positive cost efficiencies across the research system

		Assumes that equipment sharing allows institutions/researchers to attract additional investment through access to new resources Assumes that equipment sharing leads to opportunities for further collaboration that would not have happened otherwise

Outcomes to impacts

#	Causal pathway statement	Assumptions
24	**If** institutions develop strategic areas of research, **then** more areas of national and regional strategic advantage will emerge **because** the institution will be the location of cutting edge, societally important R&I resources and expertise, allowing the local area to develop critical capacity, further attracting investment, industry co-location, and talent.	Assumes supportive policy and regulatory environments that facilitate research and innovation activities. Assumes the initiatives are sustainable and scalable over time, maintaining their strategic advantage.
25	**If** institutions have greater capacity to respond rapidly to global/ national research needs, **then** England and its regions will be better equipped, and face reduced negative impact from challenges **because** institutions can respond quickly and proactively.	Assumes that faster and more effective research response will positively impact the English population
26	**If** institutions deliver more impactful and high-quality research, **then** England's capacity and reputation for research and innovation will grow, economic and societal benefits will also increase **because** institution's achievements will draw additional collaboration and investment into research, facilitating its translation into commercial and societal success, ultimately contributing to economic growth and increased productivity.	Assumes that research performed can be effectively translated into commercial products and societal benefits Assume the wider environment, including infrastructure, resources, planning, and regulation, will be available to support impactful research activities
27	**If** research investment and talent grow around English institutions, **then** research environments in England have greater capacity to deliver research **because** they	Assumes resources are used effectively to expand research capacity

	will have larger and more diverse resources to work with.	
28	**If** institutions have sustainable funding for research, **then** research environments in England will have greater capacity to deliver research **because** they will be more resilient and more attractive for further investment.	Assumes external investment will follow awareness of organisational or sector funding stability

Incentive mechanisms

#	Causal pathway statement	Assumptions
29	**If** SIRF allocation mechanisms reward research quality and impact (informed by REF outcomes) **then** high-quality research outputs and impact produced by English institutions will increase **because**, for QR, the funding distribution methods are informed by assessment of research quality and impact across all research areas, thereby incentivising institutions to continuously invest in high-quality research.	Assumes shared understanding of research 'quality' and 'impact' between institutions and panel members Assumes mechanisms do (or at least are perceived by institutions to) recognise and reward research quality and research impact Assumes institutions see the investment as leading to a net positive for their research outcomes and finances Assumes institutions investment in quality genuinely leads to increased research quality.
30	**If** SIRF allocation rewards and incentivises business and charity research through relevant support elements of QR, **then** investment in the English research sector will increase **because** institutions see it as route to secure extra funding or, at least, reduce barriers	Assumes institutions see the investment in leveraging business and charity research as leading to a net positive for their research finances and outcomes
31	**If** SIRF allocation rewards and incentivises research environment quality (via REF), **then** there will be improvements in institutions' attracting and retaining researcher and support staff **because** the QR funding distribution methods are informed by an assessment of the research environment, thereby incentivising institutions to continuously invest in people, research culture and environment policies and practices that lead to a more supportive and inclusive	Assumes shared understanding of positive research 'environment' between institutions and panel members Assumes mechanisms do (or at least are perceived by institutions to) recognise and reward positive research environments Assumes institutions see the investment as leading to a net positive for their research outcomes and finances. Assumes institutions investment in environments genuinely leads to improvements to research

	working environment and greater job satisfaction.	staff's experience of the workplace culture and opportunities. Assumes that improved experiences of workplace lead to retention and attraction of high-quality researcher and research support talent

There are also assumptions that apply across all causal pathways:

- Assumes that institutions would not have undertaken these activities and/or would not have invested funds from other sources into these activities to the same amount or in the same timeframe without SIRF (i.e., the fundamental principle of the dual-support system).
- Assumes that the funds - or at least institutions internal allocation for the specific activity - is of a sufficient amount to lead to significant/tangible change.

A.2. Methodology

A.2.1.Sampling frame

The study's proposal was to conduct interviews with 25 institutions across a representative sample of institutions. Institutions were randomly selected against criteria including:

- KEF cluster[10]
- The sum of total SIRF income received in 2023/24, excl. HEIF, the National Facilities initiative and competitive funding streams,
- Outputs submitted to the REF 2021
- The number of UOAs included in the 2021 institution's REF submission
- Geography

The target sample was revised so that it also accounts for at least 50% of SIRF expenditure. This required oversampling the largest and most research-intensive institutions.

Replacements to the target sample were made to remove institutions which were known to be undertaking other exercises with RE and were unlikely to have time to participate. The final sample includes institutions which had experienced a recent change in level of QR funding following the most recent REF exercise. It also includes institutions from all KEF clusters and all English regions.

The sample has the following characteristics:

Table 3: Cluster distribution of the sample of institutions

ARTS (Specialist)	M (Small, teaching focus)	J (Mid-sized, teaching focus)	STEM (Specialist, RI)	E (Large, RI)	X (Large, highly RI)	V (Very large, very RI)
1	1	1	2	2	6	12

[10] Research England: About the Knowledge Exchange Framework

Table 4: Regional distribution of the sample of institutions

East Midlands	East of England	London	North East	North West	South East	South West	West Midlands	Yorkshire & Humber
1	2	6	1	3	4	3	2	3

A.2.2.Outreach

To increase the likelihood of participation, initial contact was made via RE's engagement team, who have existing relationships with institutions and their research leaders. Once any institution had agreed to participate, they were introduced to the research team by email. The research team then provided a brief and a short set of introductory questions. These then set the scene for a discussion. For some institutions, the team interviewed only one representative, for others, several representatives from one institution were interviewed. Additional information from institutions was either collected via scheduled follow-up conversations or through a select number of follow-up questions in writing.

A.2.3.Introduction to the topic guide and interviews

The topic guide has been constructed to promote discussion of all research questions and all areas of the Theory of Change. To ensure this, an analysis was carried out of all of the causal links in the Theory of Change, and these were then converted into "Context-Mechanism-Outcome" hypotheses (or "CMO statements) for the research to test. These are fundamental to the realist approach as they capture how institutions use SIRF: they describe the ways in which the decisions and actions of institutions (the "mechanisms") lead to outcomes, influenced by what works for each institution and under what circumstances (the context). The CMO statements are presented in Appendix A.4 along with evidence.

The CMO statements were grouped into five key themes. These are features of SIRF which the different causal pathways and CMO statements can be grouped under:

- Flexibility and research impact
- Financial stability and sustainability
- Developing research capability
- Collaboration
- Leveraging further funding

Some small adaptations were made to the interview topic guides after the launch of data collection.

A.2.4.The topic guide

Introduction

Research England (RE) has commissioned RSM UK and RAND Europe to undertake an evaluation of RE's Strategic Institutional Research Funding (SIRF). This evaluation seeks to understand the effectiveness and impact of SIRF, focusing on its unique contributions to

supporting research and innovation within English Higher Education Providers (HEPs) and their position within the wider higher education and research landscape.

In scope are all elements of Quality-related Research (QR) funding (mainstream QR, QR Research Degree Programme (RDP) supervision funding, QR charity support funding, QR business research element, and QR funding for national research libraries). Also in scope is Research Capital Infrastructure Fund (RCIF), (comprised of HEI Research Capital England and Higher Education Research Capital) and the Ring-fenced Funds, which are Enhancing Research Culture Fund, Participatory Research Funding, Policy Support Fund, and the Specialist provider element.

[Please note that out of scope is HEIF, HEMG (Higher Education Museums and Galleries) and Competitive funding is also out of scope but the interrelationship between SIRF and competitive funding is in scope.]

Key Research Aims

Ultimately, this evaluation aims to better understand the inherent value of SIRF to institutions.

- Why is SIRF valuable and what does it enable institutions to do?
- Why does SIRF need to be preserved, and does it need to be preserved in the way it is currently approached?
- How does SIRF contribute to the long-term financial sustainability of the research system?

The primary aims of this evaluation are to:

- Assess how SIRF enables HEPs to fulfil strategic goals in research and innovation that may not be achievable with other funding types;
- Explore the ways in which SIRF supports flexibility, financial stability, sustainability, and capacity building within HEPs;
- Understand the role of SIRF in fostering collaboration, developing research capability, and leveraging further funding from additional sources; and
- Provide insights that will support evidence-based policymaking, guiding future funding allocations and enhancing the effectiveness and impact of SIRF.

Confidentiality

We have provided you with a project information sheet and a privacy notice detailing how your data will be securely handled and used solely for the purposes of this evaluation.

The interview will take approximately 60-90 minutes to complete.

Your responses are confidential and anonymous. Quotes used in the final report will be attributed to “a representative of [X-type of HEP],” without identifying individual participants. If we want to use a quote that we think might be identifiable, we will check with you first.

You have the right to a copy of your responses, to revise your input, or to withdraw from the research at any time.

Contact Details

For any queries regarding this research, please feel free to contact Team member 1 and Team member 2 [*contact details omitted from this report*]. mailto:

Note

Questions will be tailored to reflect the interviewee's role and expertise within their institution, focusing on key themes related to SIRF. Certain topics may be prioritised based on relevance to the interviewee's knowledge and contributions to the research aims.

Consent

Thank you for taking the time to speak with us today. The interview will last around 60-90 minutes. We would like to record this session for accuracy. Following GDPR requirements, we will ask for your consent to record the conversation again at the start of the recording.

Turn on recording

Findings from this evaluation will be integrated into a final report. While some quotes may be used to illustrate findings, they will not be attributed to you personally, and your name will not appear in any outputs.

Before we begin, may I confirm your consent to record this interview?

Text in italics refers to interviewer instructions

Opening questions

1. We would like to start by understanding more about your institution's current goals and objectives. Can you describe to use what are some of the top priorities you are focusing on?
2. What role does SIRF play in achieving these goals?
3. Are there any particular elements of SIRF that help you achieve these goals?

If the response does not reflect on the 'How' prompt: What is it about the current model of SIRF from Research England that allows your institution to make those strategic decisions on research activity?

If Research is not mentioned - prompt: How does SIRF enable/contribute to the strategic development of your institution's direct research activity? Do you consider SIRF to be driving research excellence at your institution?

If research impact is in scope, what components of SIRF are key to drive research impact? Prompt for Participatory Research Fund, QR charity and QR business research element.

Pre-interview questions (if not already covered in written return)

4. How does your institution allocate SIRF? Are there different approaches between the flexible, non-hypothecated block grants vs. ring-fenced funds? For example – what business model does your institution use? Centralisation of SIRF? Distribution of SIRF – to Departments/Schools? PVC-R ownership of SIRF? Top-slicing of SIRF?
5. To what extent is SIRF allocated by research teams to support the grant funding they receive? Are researchers / research teams given discretion over resource allocation
6. Does your institution use SIRF for the following, and if so, please provide examples: Please add any further uses with short examples.

- Supporting researcher and related (ECRs, MCRs, technicians etc.) career development
- Staff retainment and recruitment
- Seed-funding/bridging-funding
- Novel-research/high-risk research
- Supporting costs for external grants
- Maintaining infrastructure/capital
- Other(s):

Introduction

7. To what extent does SIRF support "business as usual" /ongoing research activity?
8. Linked to the above, how are streams of SIRF (i.e. QR, capital funding, ring-fenced funding) supporting your institution with delivering strategic priorities.

Flexibility (and research impact)

9. When and to what extent is SIRF used flexibly at your institution to meet strategic priorities, and to what extent would this flexibility be possible without SIRF?

If the response does not reflect on flexibility at the Department level prompt: To what extent does SIRF provide flexibility for researchers and research teams to allocate resources to projects?

If the response does not reflect on the 'When' prompt: Does SIRF provide flexibility for funding for novel research / high risk high reward / blue skies research, maintaining staff posts with grant funding, career development, respond to changing priorities?

10. If SIRF is used to invest in long-term research strategies, what features of SIRF help HEPs invest in long-term research strategies?

11. To what extent, and how, does the flexibility of SIRF enable long term investment in research infrastructure?

If the response does not reflect on the unique nature of SIRF Prompt: To what extent would this long-term investment be possible without SIRF?

12. To what extent does SIRF help resolve potential differences between grant funding priorities and your institution's strategic priorities?

If the response does not reflect on flexibility needed for changing priorities Prompt: To what extent does SIRF enable you to respond flexibly to changing priorities (at institution/national/international level)?

Financial Stability and Sustainability

13. Could you please briefly describe what factors are driving financial challenges (if any) for your HEP?

14. How and to what extent is SIRF used to support the challenges associated with financial sustainability at your institution?

15. Has the way your institution uses SIRF changed based on current financial sustainability challenges? If so, how has the use of SIRF changed and how has the nature of SIRF allowed you to do this?

Prompt to invite elaboration: What does SIRF allow you to do? How is this different to other funding allocations? How important is SIRF to ensuring financial sustainability for research at your institution?

16. Focussing on **capital and infrastructure sustainability**, to what extent is RCIF used to maintain and invest in infrastructure and how does this support financial stability and sustainability of your organisation?

Prompt to invite elaboration: To what extent is RCIF used to create new infrastructure for research?

Follow-up question: To what extent does well-maintained and up to date research infrastructure attract research talent?

Follow-up question: How does it enable sharing of research facilities and infrastructure? (M,O)

Follow-up question for Specialist Funding Providers: How important and to what extend is SPE for covering research costs so you institution can continue to deliver world-leading research development in your specialism?

Developing research capability

17. How and why is SIRF used to invest in people?

5. *Prompt each of the following if not discussed*:

Is SIRF used to increase staff satisfaction and progression?

Is SIRF used to increase staff recruitment and retention?

Is SIRF used to support research career's development?

Is SIRF used to cover staff research time to promote teaching?

18. Enhancing Research Culture: To what extent does the enhancing research culture fund enhance research culture and without this fund, would these activities still be prioritised?

Follow-up question: To what extent has it enabled behavioural change within your organisation around the prioritisation of research culture and environment?

19. QR Research Degree Programme: How and to what extent is QR RDP meeting the costs of supervising research degree programmes at your institution?

Follow-up question: How is the QR RDP funding used to support postgraduate students?

Follow-up question: To what extent has QR RDP contributed to the development of the talent pipeline, career progression, and postgraduate research provision?

Follow-up question: Are there any groups of students who would be particularly affected by this? (e.g. by subject/discipline, by EDI considerations (background of students, etc))

20. Specialist Provider Element: How and to what extent is SPE used to enable your institution to sustain your role in training talented researchers with sector specific knowledge and skills?

Collaboration

21. How is SIRF used to support collaboration, partnerships and knowledge sharing activities at your institution?

If additionality is not made explicit, ask: To what extent does SIRF support collaborations and partnership that are business as usual / ongoing research compared to new research activity and partnerships with charities and businesses?

If response does not consider the researcher's perspective, ask: How is SIRF used to support research staff to develop networks and partnerships?

Follow-up question: To what extent and how is ring-fenced SIRF funds and QR funding used for participatory research and community engagement activities (collaboration, research quality)?

Follow-up question: To what extent and how are different elements of SIRF used to cover overheads and engagement costs for place-based research and participatory research?

22. Policy Support Fund: How does the Policy Support Fund compare to other funding options used to engage with policymakers at local, national and international levels?

23. National Research Libraries: To what extent and how does the SIRF for the National Research Libraries support collaboration and support a shared resource for other HEPs?

Leveraging further funding

24. How does SIRF enable you to leverage additional investment from other sources?

25. *Follow-up questions* In what ways does the RCIF element of SIRF attract investment from other sources?

26. To what extent does SIRF encourage your institution to undertake research with charities?

27. *Follow-up question* How important is SIRF for covering the overhead costs associated with charity-funded research?

28. How does SIRF help leverage investment from businesses? What role does the QR business research element play here?

29. *Follow-up question* Why are collaborations and income from business important for the success of SIRF-in your institution?

Wrap up questions

30. In an 'ideal world', what changes do you believe would help enhance the effectiveness of SIRF for your institution?

31. Is there anything that has not been covered in this interview that you would like to comment on?

A.2.5. Analysis of interviews

The interviews were recorded and transcribed. All participants gave permission to record. Notes were also taken by a member of the interview team.

Transcripts were annotated and coded and matched to the interview questions (where the interview has deviated from the envisaged running order). Responses and interview questions were also matched to CMO statements.

Please note that the interview questions were not designed to collect information against all components of the C-M-O statements. Some CMO statements have different layers, and only partial evidence was collected.

A rubric was agreed for the interpretation of evidence for each C-M-O statement (see Table 5). The purpose of this was to identify salient points and compelling evidence. We have counted instances where a specific response was provided. However, the number of times a particular response was provided is not always indicative of the salience and generalisability of a statement. This is because:

- Interviews were semi-structured. Interviewers did not prompt on every C-M-O statement.
- Some funds are not available to all institutions, and sample numbers vary.
- Some interviewees volunteered information, and this additional evidence was considered in the analysis.

Altogether, evidence presented in this report is based on 1,000+ pages of notes and transcripts from 25+ interviews and 70+ interviewees, and 10 written responses. The analysis of transcripts included the following steps:

Data cleaning and coding

- Each transcript was imported into an analysis framework and double-checked against the interview questions.
- Where answers were relevant to multiple questions, cross-references were logged to avoid evidence loss caused by the semi-structured nature of the interviews.

Grouping of evidence

- For every CMO we applied a rubric that combines breadth of corroboration and absence of contradictory testimony.
- Automated summaries generated with Microsoft Copilot were used as triangulation prompts only; all final judgements were made manually.

Synthesis

- A bottom-up trace linked every finding in the report to its underlying raw evidence.
- A top-down inductive sweep then searched for emergent themes that cut across the predefined CMO structure, ensuring that unexpected but important insights were not missed.
- The strength of evidence for CMO statements was interpreted using a rubric.

Quality assurance

- Evidence presented for each CMO was reviewed by at least two members of the team.
- Evidence presented in the main body of the report was reviewed by at least two members of the team.

Table 5: Rubric – approach to the interpretation of evidence

Type	Interpretation	Implication
Compelling evidence	Evidence that a specific statement is TRUE is salient. No salient evidence that a statement is FALSE.	External factors are likely to underpin the findings. Internal factors can also contribute context.
Compelling evidence but not generalisable	Evidence that a specific statement is TRUE is salient for several institutions (4+). AND At least one institution provides evidence that a statement is FALSE.	Context (internal and/or external factors) is expected to explain why the findings differ.
Indicative	Few institutions (ca. 3) have volunteered examples which suggest that the statement could be TRUE	The causal link has not been tested across the sample. Context (internal and/or external factors) could explain why findings are important.
No evidence	No evidence that a statement is TRUE.	The statement was refuted by interviewees and is unlikely to be TRUE. External factors are likely to underpin the findings.

A.3. Detailed overview of uses of SIRF

Note: Interviewees were asked whether their institution uses SIRF for the purposes listed in the Table 6. Responses to this specific question were collected from 20 institutions. For the five other institutions in the sample, we have reviewed corroborative evidence collected against other interview questions. The variation in the sample reflects instances where no evidence was collected for select institutions. The responses should be interpreted with caution and in context.

Table 6: Use of SIRF across institutions

Type of use	Yes	Examples if 'Yes'	No
Supporting researchers and related career development (N=23)	All (100%, 23)	Fellowships, PhD support, training, network building, research festivals, and career development	None
Staff retainment and recruitment (N=23)	Vast majority (87%, 20)	Provision of short-term contracts to bridge gaps between grant-funded projects, appointment of additional research-active staff, underpinning recruitment of staff	Few (3); only indirectly though research culture
Seed-funding/bridging-funding (N=20)	Vast majority (80%, 16)	Seed-funding new research areas, creation of impactful companies, small pump priming projects, Research Accelerator Grants	Few (4)
Novel/high-risk Research (N=22)	Majority (77%, 17)	Emerging interdisciplinary areas, clinical trials, spinoff activity, capital investment, policy engagement	Some (5)
Supporting external grant costs (N=23)	Vast majority (83%, 19)	Matching on grants, supporting covering the full economic cost of research, administrative support	Few (4)
Maintaining infrastructure/capital (N=23)	Majority (74%, 17)	New labs, estate costs, capital works and replacement, and maintenance, procuring and upgrading equipment	Some (6); funding volumes considered small/not significant
Other important uses and examples (N=20)	Majority (75%, 15)	Long-term strategic investment towards e.g. • Core funding for research activities • Balancing the research budget	Some (5)

		• Supporting research capacity • EDI-minded programmes • Research culture initiatives • Policy and public engagement and impact activities • Partnership building • Participatory research • Funding staff for REF impact case studies • International scholar visiting programme • Commercialisation	

A.4. CMO statements and findings

This appendix provides a comprehensive analysis of the impacts and mechanisms associated with SIRF. Through detailed evidence collected from institutions.

The Context Mechanism and Outcome (CMO) statements were developed at the start of the evaluation, prior to collecting evidence from institutions. The tables below present the results of analysis testing the CMOs.

Limitations are indicated in the evidence tables. These include limitations to the evidence as well as limitations to the (validity of the) statement.

CMO 1	**Context: SIRF, in the form of QR, rewards high quality and impactful research through the REF and the funding formulas (research quality)**	**Mechanism: Institutions invest in research capacity and seek to carry out research of high quality and with the prospect of future impact**	**Outcome: Increased institution research quality. Increase in demonstrably impactful research.**
Evidence	13 institutions described mechanisms that align with rewarding quality by using REF outcomes or similar criteria to guide funding allocations. Respondents noted that funds can be allocated to support staff time, strategic research directions, and applied research impact (e.g., supporting staff buyouts or enabling key strategic partnerships).	12 institutions provided evidence of using SIRF or invest in research capacity. For example, one institution uses SIRF to cover staff time, enabling retention of key researchers and technicians. Another aligns SIRF with institutional objectives to create supportive career structures. Other institutions reinforce that such investment underpins a transparent open research culture.	Seven institutions mentioned that the investment is associated with higher research quality (e.g., improved REF performance, enhanced research culture, and world-class research excellence. 11 institutions reported that SIRF supports more impactful research through strategic partnerships, public engagement, or targeted investments that feed into policy and societal outcomes
Limitations	Not every institution explicitly linked their funding allocation to “rewarding” research quality and impact. Many institutions top-slice 20%–30% of their REF-based funding, so not all funds are allocated to reward excellence. The REF formula itself weights research excellence at 50%, meaning that in practice, only half of the allocation is driven by research excellent outputs.	There is variability in how funds are deployed: in some cases, ring-fenced or centrally controlled funds are used mainly for maintaining existing research activity rather than driving new, high-impact projects. Some respondents indicated that the mechanism is diluted if SIRF is used as a “stop-gap” to avoid funding cuts rather than as a strategic investment in breakthrough research.	Although several institutions report these positive outcomes, the evidence is not uniformly strong or quantified across all institutions. Few institutions provided clear, measurable attribution of high-quality outputs or impact solely to SIRF, making it difficult to fully validate this link. Some responses hint at challenge in embedding ring-fenced funds into “business as usual” operations, which may limit the overall impact.
	Compelling evidence but not generalisable	Compelling evidence	Compelling evidence but not generalisable

CMO 2	**Context: Institutions are incentivised to invest in capacity to carry out research and build relevant networks to do research supporting areas of local or national strategic advantage.**	**Mechanism: Institutions allocate SIRF to subjects that align with national and regional specialisms, leveraging funding from organisations with overlapping interests**	**Outcome: The institution's societally-important R&I resources and expertise will allow the local area to develop critical capacity. This will further attract investment, industry co-location, and talent.**
Evidence	13 institutions specifically noted investing in capacity and networks with an eye toward local or national strategic advantage.	Ten institutions described explicitly directing SIRF (QR or ring-fenced) toward fields considered regionally or nationally strategic, e.g., advanced manufacturing, local policy priorities, or subject areas with industrial partners. Some institutions emphasise a single strategic priority, others keep it broad for demand-led initiatives.	11 institutions agreed that targeted SIRF investments build local or regional capacity, bringing in new partners, industry attention, or policy engagement.
Limitations	Some institutions mention that ring-fenced or policy-specific funds are relatively small, limiting large-scale capacity-building. Some institutions can more easily align with local or regional specialisms than others, depending on existing industrial/policy ecosystems. Institutions differ widely in how they invest or build networks.	Even when aligned to local/national specialisms, the actual sums allocated can be modest, sometimes insufficient for large-scale or sustained collaborative ventures. Some institutions find it challenging to show direct Return on Investment from these strategic allocations if the funds are very small or short-term.	Not all institutions can clearly indicate how much local economic growth or co-location is directly due to these strategic R&I investments. Institutions provided anecdotal or partial data. Some institutions indicate that without continuous or increased funds, sustaining policy-facing or industry-oriented capacity can be difficult. Gains may be region-specific; one institution's success in industry collaboration may not transfer to another with different local industrial/policy landscapes.

	Compelling evidence but not generalisable	Compelling evidence but not generalisable	Indicative

CMO 3	**Context: Institutions may use SIRF to build research capacity, which can be deployed to respond rapidly to global/national research needs. England and its regions can work with institutions to solve challenges.**	**Mechanism: Institutions invest in research capacity; institutions deploy their research capacity towards global/national research needs.**	**Outcome: England and its regions face reduced negative impact from challenges.**
Evidence	14 institutions stated that SIRF (e.g., QR and ring-fenced allocations) supports building or maintaining research capacity, including bridging overhead shortfalls, backing interdisciplinary and "risky" areas, or retaining teams in strategic subjects.	17 institutions mentioned using SIRF to invest in research capacity. The mechanisms covered include: • bridging costs for staff, enabling immediate pivot to emerging calls or urgent societal issues; • pump-priming for new or interdisciplinary directions; • seed funding to gather pilot data or maintain readiness for short-notice grants.	13 institutions cited instances or claims that having stable capacity allows them to address national/regional issues more proactively—such as local industrial needs, urgent interdisciplinary calls, or unforeseen policy questions.

Limitations	Some institutions indicated SIRF does not fully align or is less critical, relying on other revenue (e.g., alumni donations). A few institutions note that the total SIRF may be too small to effect large-scale rapid responses to very large challenges. Not all institutions systematically track or attribute their capacity for rapid response directly to SIRF.	Some institutions note a mismatch in certain areas where SIRF is insufficient or does not directly incentivise rapid deployment of resources. The “rapid response” is partly dependent on institutional agility and leadership decisions, not SIRF alone. If an institution has other constraints (financial deficits, limited staff capacity), being able to “redeploy” resources quickly can still be challenging.	Direct measurement of “reduced negative impact” is not documented; institutions describe anecdotal or partial examples. Some institutions caution that bridging or flexible funds do not always guarantee immediate responsiveness if staff/time is not available at short notice. The actual scale of impact on national/regional challenges can be difficult to quantify, given external factors (policy changes, industrial shifts) also play major roles.
	Indicative	Compelling evidence but not generalisable	Compelling evidence but not generalisable

CMO 4	**<u>Context</u>: i. SIRF permits institutions to invest in and deliver more impactful and high-quality research. ii. Research and innovation can lead to economic and societal benefits.**	**<u>Mechanism</u>: i. Institutions deliver** impactful and high-quality research. **ii. Institutions invest in research and translation and attract/stimulate external investment.**	**<u>Outcome</u>: (i) Institution research attracts further collaboration and investment into research, building research capacity and reputation. (ii) Research is translated into commercial and societal success (iii) Economic growth and productivity are enhanced by these.**
Evidence	All (20) institutions underscored SIRF's importance in maintaining or enhancing research activity. 14 institutions explicitly cite investment and delivery of high quality and impactful research through improvements in research excellence, research infrastructure, strategic investments, and REF performance. Seven institutions indicated SIRF supporting R&I which can lead to economic and societal impact through translational research, policy-relevant research, contributions to regional economic development.	12 institutions described using SIRF to fund (i) new research lines, (ii) bridging or seed funding, (iii) staff time for translation or collaboration, or (iv) capacity-building, all aiming to secure further external grants/investments/partnerships.	17 institutions reported that SIRF-supported research has led to: • New or strengthened collaborations (e.g., industry partnerships, philanthropic engagements). • Capacity/reputation gains, e.g., attracting top PIs, building bigger research teams. • Strategic investments in infrastructure and talent. 14 institutions shared anecdotal evidence of SIRF-supported research leading to commercialisation and translational outcomes with societal and economic impact. Some institutions indirectly evidenced SIRF's role for broader economic growth and productivity gains.

Limitations	Several institutions did not clearly establish SIRF's direct link to achieving "impactful research"; some note it's one of many funding strands. Some institutions cautioned that SIRF is "necessary but insufficient," requiring additional grants or industry partnerships to achieve top-tier output.	The degree to which SIRF fosters external investment or translation activities differs. Some institutions focus heavily on ECR/PhD support, while others direct it to novel lines or bridging overheads. Several institutions note that while SIRF helps build external partnerships, it primarily recovers costs or underpins staff stability, limiting scope for new strategic investments. A few institutions provided evidence of actually attracting external investments. The rest of the institutions focused on elements that are likely to signal attractiveness. "Attracting external investment" is often anecdotal; few institutions track how SIRF alone drives that outcome.	Causal links between SIRF usage and direct economic/societal returns remain mostly qualitative. Many institutions claim an indirect chain: stable funding → better research → increased external interest → potential commercial or societal impact. Actual productivity or economic growth from SIRF-funded outcomes are not/rarely measured; testimonies rely on anecdotal or partial evidence (e.g., examples of spin-offs, industry deals). Some institutions did not explicitly link SIRF to major external investment or commercial success.
	i. Compelling evidence ii. Compelling evidence but not generalisable	i. Compelling evidence ii. Compelling evidence but not generalisable	i. Compelling evidence ii. Compelling evidence but not generalisable iii. Indicative

CMO 5	**Context: SIRF permits institutions to recruit and train talent and seek investment.**	**Mechanism: Institutions use SIRF to invest in development of talent and look for investment. In this way, institutions use SIRF increase the scale and diversity of their resources.**	**Outcome: i. Institutions have greater capacity to deliver research. ii. The volume and potentially the quality of English research increases.**
Evidence	13 institutions explicitly reported using SIRF to support talent acquisition. (e.g., staff and researchers hiring for hypothecated	Several institutions suggests that investments in talent development, supported by SIRF, contributed to an expansion	19 institutions say SIRF helps them expand or maintain research capacity, e.g., more staff, more PGRs, better equipment.

	projects, to drive spinout, recruitment campaigns, etc) 16 institutions highlighted SIRF's role in facilitating training, development, and career progression in form of technician training, ECR/MCR fellowships, or EDI training Seven institutions reported leveraging SIRF to attract additional investment or external funding.	in the scale of research activity. In terms of diversity, the evidence was more nuanced. While some institutions reported using SIRF to foster inclusive research cultures and support participatory and interdisciplinary projects, others did not clearly articulate this link.	Many point to increased (or at least sustained) research volume/quality
Limitations	Some institutions indicated the effect on staff retention/recruitment is indirect. The scale of these investments depends on each institution's strategy and budget constraints. Not all institutions explicitly use SIRF for bridging staff salaries, focusing instead on seed-funding or overhead coverage.	Variation in how actively institutions "seek investment" using SIRF. Some do formal match-funding while others simply maintain core staff in hopes external partners will notice. The link between SIRF investments and direct success in gaining external funding is not clearly established. Larger or research-intensive institutions generally report more success leveraging SIRF, while smaller institutions or those under financial pressure have limited capacity.	Institutions rarely provided clear insight into how much volume/quality has improved. Other funding streams (UKRI grants, philanthropic, industry) also play major roles. Thus, attributing capacity growth solely to SIRF is complicated. A few institutions did not confirm increased capacity or quality directly, citing other constraints or incomplete data.
	Compelling evidence but not generalisable	**Compelling evidence but not generalisable**	**i. Compelling evidence** **ii. No evidence**

CMO 6	**Context: Researchers use QR funding to cover overhead and engagement costs for place based research. (non-hypothecated, collaboration).**	**Mechanism: Partnerships and collaborative research with local organisations and communities. Overhead and engagement costs are met and researchers are able to do place based research**	**Outcome: (i) Increased leveraged investment and collaboration from communities. (ii) Increased involvement of English institutions in partnership and networks across geographies. (iii) Increased use of research by end-users and other researchers.**
Evidence	A diverse set of institutions state that the principal enabling factor for covering overheads and engagement costs in place-based and participatory research is the ring-fenced SIRF streams—particularly the PRF, the ERC and the PSF. Institutions consistently describe these streams as small but pivotal, underwriting staff time and bridging costs that neither industry sponsors nor traditional grants will meet.	Several institutions report an increase in community-facing activities—from "festival of communities" events through to rural micro-mobility co-design with young people—that would not have proceeded, or would have been much reduced, without these dedicated funds.	For several institutions, SIRF investments have built institutional capacity: dedicated staff roles to sustain partnerships with anchor organisations, local authorities and cultural bodies, while open-call projects have spawned new networks for early-career researchers and underrepresented groups.

Limitations	This CMO would be validated if this read researchers use QR funding to cover overhead and engagement costs for place based research (not underpinning activities). Ring-fenced funding is dedicated to this.	Annual cycles hinder long-term planning; while some mitigate this by early calls or using core budgets, others struggle with multi-year projects. Ring-fenced funding streams often overlaps with QR and industry co-funding, making it hard to isolate each stream's impact.	Impact varies due to differences in fund size, allocation models, and institutional priorities. Larger, centrally managed funds support strategic initiatives and dedicated teams. In contrast, smaller or heavily top-sliced funds risk being "retrospectively badged" rather than genuinely supporting participatory work. The overall evidence does not confirm a measurable increase in leveraged investment or end-user uptake attributable to this funding approach.
	Compelling evidence	Compelling evidence but not generalisable	i. Indicative ii. Compelling evidence iii. Indicative

CMO 7	**<u>Context</u>: QR funding provides Institutions with greater financial stability (to support them undertake blue skies research)**	**<u>Mechanism:</u> Institutions' financial stability enables investing in high risk high reward, novel or blue skies research**	**<u>Outcome</u>: Institutions produce diverse and impactful research**
Evidence	Six institutions highlighted that QR funding underpins financial stability, supporting staff retention and ongoing research activity.	11 institutions described how SIRF's flexibility allows them to pursue new research directions quickly, use seed funding for high-risk approaches, and make strategic investments (e.g. interdisciplinary centres, pilot data development).	Seven institutions provided examples: one institution noted quick pursuit of new research directions; another cited hydrogen-fuel research that became commercially relevant; another mentioned blue skies research as a basis for grant applications; one referenced flexible time for developing pilot data. Examples were also provided around the use of

			SIRF as pump-priming funds to create pilots and proofs-of-concept for data.
Limitations	While the role of QR in underpinning financial stability is well noted (by six institutions), its direct translation into (more) high-risk research and/or blue skies research is not explicitly detailed by most institutions (with the current financial sustainability crisis context partially explaining this). The REF impact agenda could also have an unintended consequence although that link was not discussed in interviews.	At least four institutions noted that the overall SIRF or QR funding pot is relatively small considering the institutions' needs, which can constrain high-risk initiatives. Some institutions emphasised the need for proof of concept before external funding is sought, indicating potential limits on high-risk investments.	Not all institutions offered clear, measurable evidence linking SIRF-funded researcher time directly to diverse or high-impact research outcomes. The data does not allow directly attributing research diversity and impact solely to SIRF.
	Indicative	Compelling evidence but not generalisable	Indicative

CMO 8	**<u>Context</u>: The availability of SIRF means that institutions can invest in building and strengthening networks and partnerships.**	**<u>Mechanism</u>: Researchers/research teams can pursue their own strategic research priorities with resourcing flexibility and efficiency by leveraging their networks and partnerships**	**<u>Outcome</u>: (i) Increased involvement of English institutions in partnerships and networks across sectors and geographies. (ii) Institutions generate more impactful research, potentially of higher quality, or more efficiently or at higher speed, in their areas of strategic priority and research strength.**
Evidence	Many (12) institutions highlighted how SIRF's flexibility strengthens external collaborations and gives them the capacity to pursue new or evolving research priorities, and develop seed or pump-priming initiatives. Five institutions specifically noted forming or expanding partnerships / networks across local, national, or international contexts.	Eight institutions described how SIRF's resourcing flexibility allows them to respond quickly to new opportunities, buy out staff time for collaborations, and co-invest in joint initiatives with external partners. Examples include pivoting to meet new funding calls, buying out researchers from teaching, or funding pilot studies and seed collaborations.	Five institutions mentioned new or expanded partnerships at local, national, and international level but did not explicitly confirm that SIRF enabled this increase. Seven institutions indicated SIRF-funded initiatives support impactful or higher-quality research (e.g. alignment with institutional/national priorities, quicker pilot data generation).
Limitations	While institutions widely acknowledged the importance of SIRF in facilitating partnerships, Two institutions indicated they do not see a significant overall impact from SIRF on partnership development. No institution explicitly attributed large-scale infrastructure or building projects solely to SIRF.	Several respondents noted that SIRF alone might not cover all costs of complex or large-scale partnerships, requiring supplementary funding (e.g. from industry, charities, or other government sources). A few institutions did not offer specifics on how SIRF facilitates or enhances their strategic priorities, indicating varied institutional reliance on these funds for partnerships activities.	None of the institutions provided direct, quantitative evidence linking SIRF investment to a measurable increase in the number of partnerships to a definitive jump in research quality or speed. Some institutions referenced synergy with other funding streams rather than attributing outcomes solely to SIRF (making attribution difficult). References to "impactful" or "high-quality" research were primarily qualitative.

	Compelling evidence	Compelling evidence but not generalisable	i. Compelling evidence but not generalisable ii. Indicative

CMO 9	**Context: SIRF provides non-hypothecated funding for institutions to invest in research capacity/capability and opportunities as they see fit. Institutions invest in research which addresses current and future national and global challenges because these are likely to be impactful.**	**Mechanism: English/UK institutions identify current and future national and global challenges and carry out research that is relevant and impactful in these areas.**	**Outcome: English/UK institutions generate research outputs that are relevant to current and future national and global challenges.**
Evidence	Nine institutions mentioned that some of the SIRF was "held in reserve" for issues that suddenly need prioritisation (e.g., staff time, consumables budgets, or data-licence fees). This allows for prototype datasets, pilot assays, and draft policy briefs to be initiated early, giving institutions—and the UK system—a head start on key priorities. Some institutions gave examples related to research and pilot studies in key priority areas where they were able to resources and equipment within days.	Representatives from the nine institutions said their research offices met regularly—weekly or daily in crises—to decide on using reserves for urgent policy questions. In large STEM-focused institutions, decisions were centralised, while in mid-sized and specialist institutions, they involved faculties.	Some institutions provided cases or anecdotal examples related to research and pilot studies in key priority areas where they were able to invest resources and equipment within days.

Limitations	Two of nine institutions (both allocated less than £10m per year in QR funding) spoke about the financial pressure they face and find that reserves can be eroded by day-to-day overhead needs.	Few institutions highlighted that they have research strengths in UK government priorities. However, significant investment in infrastructure—such as data processing, storage, and secure facilities—is required to support research in key government priority areas.	Data was not systematically collected against this statement
	Compelling evidence but not generalisable	Compelling evidence but not generalisable	Indicative

CMO 10	**Context: Policy Support Fund SIRF is used for linking with policy research priorities at local, national and international level.**	**Mechanism: Resources are allocated to policy research; working relationships between researchers and policy makers.**	**Outcome: Increased involvement of English institutions in partnerships and networks across sectors and geographies. Increased knowledge sharing between researchers and policymakers.**
Evidence	Five institutions mentioned this linkage. This fund was described by representatives of institutions as nimble and research offices said that they release this funding to fund secondments, rapid-evidence briefs or small engagement teams.	Four institutions referenced elements that imply policy engagement and knowledge sharing. For example, awards have paid for academics to work inside arm's-length regulators, to embed analysts in combined-authority growth teams, or to convene citizen-science workshops. For these examples provided, the PSF was said to underwrite staff time, travel, and meetings costs which competitive grants rarely cover.	Involvement in partnerships and networks was mentioned by six institutions. Knowledge sharing was highlighted by four institutions. Five institutions could point to PSF projects that produced tangible outputs such as parliamentary evidence packs, regional strategy documents or regulator guidance notes.
Limitations	Not all institutions provided detailed information on Policy Support Fund linking. Some responses were indirect, limiting the strength of validation.	No interview responses explicitly detailed how these resource allocations directly establish working relationships between researchers and policymakers.	In several interviews, research offices were noted to spread the funding thinly to maximise participation, inadvertently making outcomes harder to capture.

			Not all institutions provided explicit examples linking these outcomes to the funding. Details on knowledge sharing and network expansion were not uniformly provided, limiting clear attribution.
	Compelling evidence but not generalisable	**Compelling evidence but not generalisable**	**Compelling evidence but not generalisable**

CMO 11	**<u>Context</u>: RCIF supports sustainable investment in research facilities and infrastructure ensuring long term sustainability and reduced overheads from maintenance. RCIF supports maintenance of investment in infrastructure and capital, and mainstream QR supplements the need to support infrastructure.**	**<u>Mechanism</u>: Facilities and infrastructure for research are available for use by institution research teams and other partners.**	**<u>Outcome</u>: Reduced capital costs and improved financial stability**
Evidence	Across the 22 institution respondents, the key enabling factor is the predictable, flexible block nature of RCIF. Institutions emphasise that, unlike time-limited project grants, this stream can be pooled, rolled forward and aligned with wider capital envelopes. In large research-intensive institutions, grants are pooled and allocated by cross-faculty committees to fund major infrastructure and equipment. Mid-sized STEM institutions rely on RCIF to update lab tools, while smaller teaching-focused institutions use it to sustain niche digital and arts platforms.	Some very large institutions use formal boards or open-bid processes to allocate capital research funds based on strategic goals, demand, and sustainability. Smaller institutions typically allocate funds for specific needs due to limited planning capacity. Across all types of institutions, many of them link RCIF funding decisions to long-term costs and staffing is seen as essential to avoid underused assets. 10 institutions explicitly highlighted that RCIF maintains or improves labs, equipment, and digital infrastructure, directly supporting research teams and sometimes external partners.	Majority of institutions credit RCIF with maintaining top-tier labs, reducing downtime, attracting talent, and enabling collaboration. About half cite cost savings from planned renewals, bulk tenders, or match funding. However, only a minority—mainly smaller or specialist institutions—report improved financial stability. For large research-intensive institutions, the grant is essential but inadequate, dwarfed by massive estate backlogs. Digital infrastructure, cyber-resilience, and decarbonisation are frequently cited as underfunded areas.

Limitations	Disciplinary focus shapes RCIF funding support: science-focused institutions stress the high cost and rapid obsolescence of equipment; arts institutions value smaller investments in tailored tools; and teaching-led universities highlight the risk of small budgets being overwhelmed by single failures. Some institutions made it clear that RCIF cannot typically fund entirely new facilities or large-scale building projects.	Access to updated infrastructure remains constrained by overall funding size; some institutions must wait or seek additional sources if RCIF is insufficient. Not all institutions have the same process or timing for releasing RCIF funds, so urgent capital needs can go unmet if the RCIF budget is already committed. The reliance on external or charity co-funding can complicate how quickly improvements become available.	Many institutions warn that funding volatility—due to inflation, salary costs, or reduced international income—undermines grant value and long-term planning. RCIF alone rarely guarantees major financial stability, as many institutions must still top up with additional funds from competitive grants or institutional borrowing.
	Compelling evidence	**Compelling evidence but not generalisable**	**Compelling evidence but not generalisable**

CMO 12	**Context: SIRF is invested in infrastructure required for specialist research with high overhead costs.**	**Mechanism: Access to specialist equipment enables specialist research.**	**Outcome: Increase in novel, cutting edge, high-risk high-reward and/or blue skies research activity.**
Evidence	12 institutions reported using SIRF (QR, RCIF, or ring-fenced elements) for specialist infrastructure that carries high overhead costs (e.g., HPC, large lab facilities, niche instrumentation). institutions of every size noted that the visibility of such facilities is a critical part of the recruitment “offer” they make to senior principal investigators, early-career researchers and industrial partners.	Eight institutions specifically mentioned that SIRF’s support for specialist equipment/labs directly enables advanced or niche research that otherwise might not be feasible. Many institutions stated that SIRF acts as a strategic lever rather than a standalone fund, often blended with other sources like Research Council capital, charity grants, or commercial input. Few institutions in London and the Midlands use centrally held QR to enforce cross-faculty equipment sharing and standardised rates, boosting utilisation and training.	Ten institutions stated that investing in high-overhead specialist infrastructure fosters innovative, high-risk and/or blue skies research. Several institutions reported improved talent attraction and retention, crediting well-equipped labs and flexible funding for reducing staff turnover. Ring-fenced strands were repeatedly linked to more inclusive career development, stronger regional partnerships and, in a few cases, measurable policy influence.

Limitations	The total pot of SIRF/QR is often insufficient alone to fund large-scale or highly specialised infrastructure, requiring additional external or commercial sources. Operational barriers (e.g., cost recovery for overheads, insurance, shared facility management) can limit how effectively these investments are used across institutions. Some smaller or less research-intensive institutions face difficulty leveraging SIRF at scale for specialist facilities.	The mechanism is uneven. Smaller or teaching-focused universities often receive modest allocations, which are mainly used for staff time or proof-of-concept studies rather than major infrastructure. Several research intensive institutions also warned that SIRF is too limited to cover frontier equipment, requiring external co-funding and causing delays.	The link between infrastructure investment and genuinely high-risk research is indirect. Some institutions noted the "small pot" problem: while SIRF fosters novel research, scale is limited if the sum is small relative to overheads. There is limited evidence showing how SIRF leads to more "impactful" outputs. Some anecdotal or single-project examples were provided.
	Compelling evidence but not generalisable	**Compelling evidence but not generalisable**	**Compelling evidence but not generalisable**

CMO 13	**Context: QR funding is invested to create new infrastructure for high quality cutting edge research that is aligned to institution strategic priorities (Infrastructure, strategic priorities).**	**Mechanism: Researchers use funded facilities to undertake high quality cutting edge research.**	**Outcome: Increase in novel cutting edge high risk high reward research activity.**
Evidence	Most institutions described using QR (or RCIF) for maintaining, replacing, or modestly expanding existing research infrastructure (e.g., HPC, data storage, lab equipment). Several indicated these investments align with strategic goals, but few specifically cited creation of entirely new large-scale infrastructure solely via QR.	Most large research intensive institutions and half of the smaller institutions centrally allocate funds to internal competitive schemes. These support early-career researchers, cover funding gaps, or provide small capital for shared equipment. Several institutions noted "quick-turnaround pot" enables rapid pilot studies, partnerships, or community projects. The majority of funds are devolved to faculties to sustain core research roles, technician salaries, leave cover, and infrastructure. Eight institutions gave examples of "novel" or "risky" research partially supported by SIRF and an infrastructure backbone, but none	At least 15 institutions cite measurable improvements in staff recruitment or retention, such as reduced turnover among high-demand data scientists. Several institutions noted that SIRF catalyses research activity judged too novel, interdisciplinary or speculative for conventional calls. They mention examples such as interdisciplinary fields, hydrogen, or clinical spin-offs, suggesting SIRF's flexibility helps, but none tied it directly to "building new facilities at scale."

		specifically attributed it to brand-new facilities funded purely by QR.	
Limitations	Multiple institutions said QR alone is not sufficient for major new capital builds; typically, other pots or external grants are also needed. As a result, the notion that QR regularly funds new cutting-edge infrastructure at scale was refuted by interviewees.	Interviewees generally did not confirm that QR-funded "new" infrastructure is the direct enabler of cutting-edge research; more often, it maintains or upgrades pre-existing labs or equipment. The extent to which these facilities alone lead to high-quality or novel research remains unquantified, as many other factors (e.g., staff expertise, external collaboration) also play a role.	While institutions indicate novel/high-risk research is happening, they do not generally credit QR-based new infrastructure as its key driver. Many institutions highlight that truly large or pioneering facilities require other capital sources (e.g., EPSRC grants, philanthropic funds). Some institutions emphasise external conditions (strategic planning, external partnerships) overshadow the effect of QR infrastructure funds on actual novel research outputs.
	Indicative	**No evidence**	**No evidence**

CMO 14	**Context: SIRF's non-hypothecated funding streams are made available to invest in skills and capacity development initiatives.**	**Mechanism: Institutions invest in skills and capacity development initiatives to address skills shortages/gaps or employee dissatisfaction.**	**Outcomes: i. Increased volume and/or quality of research output from institutions due to more highly skilled staff. ii. Increased career progression and staff retention.**
Evidence	16 institutions reported using SIRF to support skills and capacity development (e.g., training for Early Career Researchers, mentoring, and research culture initiatives).	Six institutions specifically mentioned using non-hypothecated funding to address skills shortages and gaps. 14 institutions mentioned using SIRF to support the development of researchers' careers, or improve employee satisfaction (e.g., bridging overhead shortfalls, ECR/mid-career support, HR Excellence in Research).	Few institutions spoke about how better-skilled staff can lead to improved research outputs. They did not conclusively attribute this improvement to SIRF alone. 14 institutions indicated SIRF contributes to career progression and staff retention (e.g., by providing stable contracts or fellowship schemes).

Limitations	While SIRF is recognised as useful for capacity building, some institutions find it insufficient alone to address large-scale or systemic skills shortages. Staff recruitment and retention also depends on broader institutional factors (tuition income stability, competing offers, etc.).	The link between SIRF investments and actual improvements in staff satisfaction or reduced skills shortages is often indirect, as many institutions also rely on ring-fenced or external funds. A few institutions described broader structural changes not solely attributable to SIRF.	There is no strong evidence suggesting a direct causal link between SIRF's skill/capacity initiatives and measurable increases in research output quality or volume. The link between SIRF, greater career progression and satisfaction, and greater retention within academia is also indirect. Career progression and retention improvements may also result from other funding sources or institutional policies; SIRF alone is one factor among many. some institutions perceive a positive effect, but comprehensive evidence is lacking.
	Compelling evidence	**Compelling evidence but not generalisable**	**i. Indicative** **ii. Compelling evidence but not generalisable**

CMO 15	**<u>Context</u>: SIRF provides stable, unhypothecated research funding for institutions, annually and independently of fixed-term research contracts. Institutions can maintain staff posts (including permanent contracts) regardless of the current level of grant income.**	**<u>Mechanism</u>: Institutions fund staff posts, including permanent contracts, for stability of research capability/capacity.**	**<u>Outcome</u>: Institutions maintain research capability/capacity in the face of variable grant income. Staff satisfaction and retention are potentially improved, along with research environment/culture.**
Evidence	18 institutions acknowledge the importance of stable, non-hypothecated SIRF/QR funding. Some institutions mentioned explicitly using SIRF to support staff posts (including permanent contracts) or administrative infrastructure for research teams.	Is (19) use QR/PGR to invest in PhDs and this was seen to support the stability of research capability and stability.	19 institutions agree on the importance of SIRF in maintaining research capability (e.g., bridging overhead gaps, sustaining strategic roles). 10 institutions report improved staff satisfaction and/or retention linked to stable funding.

Limitations	Examples were often provided for resource needed at the central level. In at least one case it was noted that using QR funding to create stable posts for ECRs was not financially sustainable and strategically desirable.	The extent to which institutions can or do use SIRF for permanent positions varies. Some rely more on fixed-term or external grants. No detailed data on the specific proportion of staff funded via SIRF, making it hard to gauge overall impact on workforce stability.	Causal attribution of improved retention or environment solely to SIRF is not explicit; multiple factors (institutional policies, alternative funds) may also matter. Some note PGR or staff posts remain partially underfunded, highlighting that SIRF alone may not fully protect against financial risks.
	Compelling evidence but not generalisable	**Indicative**	**Compelling evidence but not generalisable**

CMO 16	**<u>Context</u>: The availability of QR funding provides heads of Schools/Heads of Department the means to invest in people.**	**<u>Mechanism</u>: Institutions are able to attract and retain talented researchers by providing researchers opportunity to pursue their interests.**	**<u>Outcome</u>: Greater career progression and satisfaction.**
Evidence	Across responses from 19 institutions QR funding (and not considering PGR) was only somewhat acknowledged as a means to invest in people (e.g., ECR training, mentorship).	Few institutions mentioned that QR helps attract and retain researchers (e.g., funding new initiatives, supporting ECR career paths).	Three institutions explicitly connected QR investments to improved career progression or satisfaction (e.g., via conference travel, training, or bridging funds). Three institutions imply a positive effect but did not provide clear data or examples of improved progression/satisfaction.
Limitations	QR funds are in many cases / not always sufficient to cover the full cost of staff (including salaries) and also including PGR supervision; many institutions rely on other sources for top-ups. The extent to which departmental heads can truly allocate QR for “people investments” varies depending on internal institutional policies and overhead obligations.	Other factors (institutional prestige, local living costs, alternative grants) also heavily influence researcher decisions to join or stay. While institutions highlight QR’s role, no systematic data shows how many staff are attracted or retained because of QR alone. Mechanism depends on each institution’s strategic priorities; some may funnel QR into overheads or other areas, reducing direct impact on researcher opportunities.	No direct, quantitative evidence links QR funding to measurable improvements in career satisfaction or progression rates. The relationship between stable funding and staff morale is often described as “indirect” in interviews; many institutions mention other structural or cultural factors (e.g., local career frameworks, departmental culture). Some institutions direct QR mainly toward facilities or PGR support, so the effect on staff retention or

			satisfaction is not necessarily uniform.
	Compelling evidence but not generalisable	**Indicative**	**Indicative**

CMO 17	**<u>Context</u>: Availability of funds to cover staff research time is necessary to give staff the freedom to take on teaching responsibilities.**	**<u>Mechanism</u>: Research staff are funded to be able to take sabbaticals. Research staff embed research into their teaching activities.**	**<u>Outcome</u>: Research is embedded into the curriculum; in the longer term, students have greater knowledge and understanding of research, and may be more likely to pursue a research career.**
Evidence	Few institutions noted that SIRF or general QR helps free up staff time, but they did not explicitly link this to enabling teaching duties. Instead, they said staff capacity is underpinned by overhead coverage or "buyouts," which indirectly might help if staff also teach.	Few (four) institutions described sabbatical, or fellowship programmes funded in part by QR, but they emphasised staff development, research culture, or skill-building rather than reorganising teaching loads.	Few (four) institutions vaguely suggested that staff receiving research support might integrate findings into teaching, but none explicitly cited SIRF as the cause of changes to curriculum design or teaching practice. A few references noted that research "inevitably" feeds into teaching, but no direct SIRF-funded "teaching revamp" or impetus to embed research was mentioned.
Limitations	Several institutions indicated that SIRF does not specifically fund teaching buyouts. No institution provided a clear example where SIRF was used explicitly for staff to spend more time teaching and embedding research in the curriculum.	Some institutions stated sabbaticals or teaching relief are arranged by other means (e.g., strategic development funds, departmental budgets), not specifically SIRF. Embedding research in teaching is primarily described as a standard academic role duty rather than a direct outcome of SIRF.	Interviewees generally refuted a direct link between SIRF and embedding research into teaching; any synergy is largely incidental to typical academic roles. No institution provided evidence that students became more likely to pursue research careers because staff were freed up by SIRF to embed research in the curriculum. Some explicitly noted that SIRF focuses on research, not on formal teaching buyouts or curriculum redesign.
	No evidence	No evidence	No evidence

CMO 18	**Context: QR RDP funding is available to support supervision of post graduate researchers.**	**Mechanism: More places are available for PGR students. Funding is allocated to provide a good quality experience for students.**	**Outcome: i. Increase in number and diversity of PGR students. Increase in research career progression. ii. Increase in career and job satisfaction.**
Evidence	Institutions (11) find QR RDP funding helpful but insufficient to cover the cost of supervising and training Research Degree Programmes.	At some institutions (five) funding is used to provide studentships, possibly enabling the creation of more places for PGR student. Funding is also used for strategic purposes that indirectly support students.	There was some support for the notion that targeted investment in the supervision of postgraduate research students can lead to increases in high-quality researcher talent and a larger and more diverse population of postgraduate research students.
Limitation	Representatives from several institutions emphasised that QR RDP only covers a fraction of the actual costs involved.		No evidence is found that QR RDP leads to an increase in career and job satisfaction.
	Compelling evidence but not generalisable	**Indicative**	**i. Indicative ii. No evidence**

CMO 19	**Context: UoAs submit statements on environment, culture, and strategy for enabling research and impact. These form part of REF and therefore contribute to QR funding distribution. This incentivises institutions to invest in improving their environment and culture.**	**Mechanism: Institutions continuously invest in research culture, and policies and practices promoting a supportive and inclusive working environment.**	**Outcome: Job satisfaction is increased. This leads to increased retention of staff and potentially increased attraction (through perception of institutions as good workplaces).**
Evidence	Interviewees were not invited to specifically comment on the link between SIRF and the REF. One institution noted that they are very aware of the culture aspect, especially with REF coming up. They are involved in pilot activity which they think will highlighting areas where there is scope to improve culture. It was also noted that it is uncertain if there is widespread appetite or need for these changes across the faculty.	Multiple institution responses reference initiatives like revised promotion criteria, internal awards, and enhanced support structures that indicate ongoing investment in research culture.	Interview responses from several institutions imply enhanced job satisfaction; additional responses indicate improved retention or attraction.
Limitations		The impact of these investments on job satisfaction and retention is not quantitatively measured. The link between cultural investments and outcomes remains largely qualitative.	There is no direct, systematic evidence that these outcomes are solely attributable to the incentivisation of research culture via QR funding. Other factors beyond research culture may contribute to job satisfaction, retention, and attraction.
	Indicative	**Compelling evidence but not generalisable**	**Indicative**

CMO 20	**Context: Non-hypothecated elements of SIRF – chiefly QR – can be used to make improvements to the research culture and**	**Mechanism: Institutions invest in improvements to research culture and environment with the intention of:**	**Outcome: Institutions generate tangible net improvements to working environment through improved policies and practices. Researcher**

	environment. Institutions will invest in improvements to research culture and environment if they feel it will lead to changes in researcher attitudes and behaviours, and overall staff retention, in such a way as to be net positives for research effectiveness and efficiency (people, collaboration).	**carrying out a higher volume of research carrying out research of higher quality or impact carrying out research more efficiently through reduction of HR overheads.**	**attitudes and behaviour are changed in ways that improve research quality and/or volume.**
Evidence	Ten institutions described using either ring-fenced "Research Culture" funds or general QR for initiatives that support research culture (e.g., ECR training, diversity efforts, policy statements, research integrity projects). Some institutions say these efforts are accelerated by the dedicated funds; others suggest they would do them anyway, albeit more slowly or on a smaller scale.	ECR development or diversity programmes are seen as ways to boost overall output/impact. A few institutions explicitly linked these initiatives to higher quality work, better integrity, or more collaborative behaviour.	Ten institutions say they have observed or at least initiated improved policies/practices (e.g., statements of research excellence, cultural toolkits, EDI training).
Limitations	Institutions do not always explicitly connect these culture/environment efforts to changes in staff retention or researcher behaviours – such results, if any, are presumed or only partly observed. Some institutions note uncertainty about how widely or deeply staff embrace these new culture initiatives. The "enhanced research culture" ring-fenced pot is typically modest, meaning large or systematic changes to culture may require broader institutional commitment. Six institutions find that they have not seen significant cultural change within their institutions because of SIRF.	Institutions did not offer concrete insight demonstrating that these culture/environment investments directly yielded higher research volume, quality, or efficiency. Some institutions are unsure if staff attitudes or HR overheads are significantly changed, especially in the short term. Actual improvements may rely on intangible factors (e.g., institutional leadership, local culture champions), not just the presence of ring-fenced funds.	While many institutions point to positivity or anecdotal improvements, quantifying or attributing them solely to these culture initiatives (SIRF-funded) is difficult. Some institutions noted that cultural change is a long-term process.
	Compelling evidence but not generalisable	**Indicative**	**Indicative**

CMO 21	**<u>Context</u>: i. SIRF provides funding for research at a relatively stable and predictable level through formula-based funding. Institutions can allocate SIRF in line with their longer-term strategic goals. ii. Availability of SIRF means that the share of institution income which is reliant on grant applications is lower. Institutions therefore decide to spend a lower share of their time (research and support) on grant applications.**	**<u>Mechanism</u>: i. Institutions devise and invest in long-term research strategies. Institutions identify areas for investment in research capability/ capacity and allocate funds accordingly. ii. Institutions require lower resource inputs for researchers to submit grant applications, and for the associated service admin. Institutions therefore allocate their overall research budget more efficiently.**	**<u>Outcome</u>: i. Maintenance of, or improvement in, research infrastructure. ii. Maintenance of, or improvement in, research capacity. iii. Efficient generation of research outputs. Achievement of institutional strategic goals. Institutions achieve greater efficiency in knowledge generation.**
Evidence	<u>All</u> institutions value SIRF because it provides stable and/or predictable funding. 12 institutions specifically mentioned stable/predictable funding enabling longer-term planning. Eight institutions emphasised multi-year block funding for strategic decisions, development of infrastructure, or workforce planning.	11 institutions highlighted long-term strategic investment (e.g., building interdisciplinary centres, infrastructure, staff roles). Some institutions noted QR reduces reliance on grants for certain overheads or bridging funds, but no one provided evidence of systematically reducing grant applications or admin time.	Eight institutions specifically mentioned maintenance/improvement of research infrastructure (e.g., labs, HPC, advanced centres) tied to stable SIRF. No direct evidence that institutions spend less time on grants or produce research more “efficiently” because of SIRF, although some noted partial references to higher-quality outputs.

Limitations	Several institutions noted the importance of stable funding but did not explicitly claim it reduced the share of time spent on grant applications. A few institutions expressed that short lead times or ring-fenced allocations (e.g., policy or culture funds) can still limit true long-horizon planning.	No institution provided clear data that SIRF definitively lowers resource inputs for grant applications. The broader environment (e.g., new external opportunities, the REF cycle) also shapes the extent to which institutions can commit to long-term strategies independent of SIRF.	While many institutions value SIRF's stability, no institution confirmed that it meaningfully reduces administrative burdens around grant applications. No systematic measure of "efficiency" (in outputs or knowledge generation) was provided, making it difficult to validate direct efficiency gains from stable SIRF. two institutions indicated that maintaining or upgrading infrastructure still depends on additional funds.
	i. Compelling evidence **ii. No evidence**	**i. Compelling evidence** **ii. No evidence**	**i. Compelling evidence** **ii. Compelling evidence but not generalisable** **iii. No evidence**

CMO 22	**<u>Context</u>: QR funding is allocated by institutions to support activities that align with their research strategies. These strategies may differ from activities funded through other means such as competitive grants.**	**<u>Mechanism</u>: Resources are directed to research activities that can add the most value to their strategic priorities.**	**<u>Outcome</u>: Increase in researchers and institution driven strategic priority research.**
Evidence	All institutions reported that QR funding underpins activities aligning with institutional strategies (e.g., seeding new areas, investing in HPC, building staff capacity). 14 institutions specifically spoke about the SIRF being used flexibly to meet strategic priorities. Some institutions specifically noted that QR funding provides predictability and consistency for long-term planning.	Institutions (14+) mentioned directing QR resources to strategic priorities (e.g., staff time, overhead costs for place-based initiatives, pilot data for new research lines). Institutions used flexibility to support "risky" or underfunded areas, complementing externally funded programmes.	Institutions (14+) indicated that QR allocations enable them to hire new researchers, retain teams, or expand high-priority areas (e.g., AI, data science, policy research). Some institutions noted that these investments can lead to stronger departmental performance and broader strategic portfolios.

Limitations	No direct evidence confirms that these strategies differ from those supported by competitive grants. In many cases institutions may simply allocate a layer of QR funding on top of externally funded projects. A few institutions indicated that QR's relative scale can be limiting, especially where significant capital or advanced infrastructure is required.	Several institutions said that while QR funding is flexible, it often goes toward covering existing overheads or bridging shortfalls in grants rather than fully funding new strategic expansions. Interviews did not explicitly conclude that longer-term investment is always "more strategic"; usage varies across institutions, and some funds simply maintain existing capacity.	Gains in researchers or strategic research areas may also stem from external project grants, philanthropic support, or other funding streams—making it difficult to isolate QR's exact effect. Varying institutional approaches mean not all institutions channel QR into staff growth or new programmes; some use it for sustaining existing teams instead of actively growing capacity, and such investments can also be considered strategic.
	Compelling evidence	**Compelling evidence but not generalisable**	**Compelling evidence but not generalisable**

CMO 23	**Context: The availability of QR funding means that institutions can make long-term investments to support long-term priorities.**	**Mechanism: Institution resources are used to develop capacity through investments in infrastructure, talent or niche areas where they may have a strategic advantage.**	**Outcome: Improved financial stability.**
Evidence	Across the sample (20 institutions), institutions acknowledged that the flexibility of SIRF/QR funding is crucial for enabling long-term or strategic investments in infrastructure. Several institutions acknowledged SIRF as helpful but stated it's insufficient on its own for large capital projects.	All institutions that provided input (20) mentioned using SIRF to invest in infrastructure for strategic purposes (e.g. HPC, data storage, specialised labs), create or support specialised teams (e.g. cell/gene therapy, AI research).	Institutions find that SIRF, and including RCIF, is a critical source of funding. Some institutions find that RCIF can enable funding smaller "pieces of equipment to support the maintenance and growing of some of our large pieces of equipment" and this can become financially sustainable through RCIF. Several others implied SIRF's predictability underpins general financial planning (e.g., bridging overheads, sustaining staff). A few institutions mentioned that without SIRF, they would have difficulty maintaining specialised or costly research capacity in the long term.
Limitations	SIRF's share of total capital is often small, so large-scale infrastructure or major builds remain difficult without additional external funds. A few institutions pointed out that while SIRF helps, it cannot fully offset financial constraints if multiple new or niche investments are needed simultaneously.	The interview data did not yield explicit examples proving that these capacity investments are always undertaken because of a strategic advantage – i.e., no clear evidence that "niche or emerging areas" selection is solely enabled by SIRF. Some institutions referenced ring-fenced or commercial funding for large infrastructure rather than relying on RCIF and or QR funding alone.	Most institutions did not clearly state that SIRF (alone) produces substantial financial stability, only that it contributes to it alongside other revenue streams. Where institutions rely heavily on commercial or external capital funds, SIRF's stabilising effect can be overshadowed by other financial dependencies.
	Compelling evidence but not generalisable	**Indicative**	**Compelling evidence but not generalisable**

CMO 24	**Context: QR funding is allocated to researchers / research teams that drive competitive research funding projects and they are given discretion over resource allocation.**	**Mechanism: Researchers / research teams have resource to build on activities funded through competitive research.**	**Outcome: High quality research outputs**
Evidence	13 institutions explicitly indicate researchers/research teams have some degree of discretion over SIRF/QR allocation.	In the context where researchers, research teams are said to have discretion over QR allocation, three institutions explicitly describe using QR as "gap-fill" or "bridge" funding to supplement competitively funded projects where the main funders do not provide the full cost of research. For four other institutions the discretionary spend was explicitly said to be used to fund activities such as conferences, recruiting research assistants and other researchers, materials.	One institution mentions the discretionary funding helps researchers and research teams invest in "people and opportunities" which leads to better outputs.
Limitations	Many institutions note a certain percentage of QR is "top-sliced" centrally, so not all is devolved to the PIs/teams. The degree of researcher-level discretion (versus school/faculty-level) differs significantly, which can dilute the extent to which researchers themselves control supplements to competitive grants. Some institutions have centralised funds but researchers can apply for the funding.	Some institutions mention a strategic committee or similar that decides usage, which may not necessarily supplement external grants but instead supports broader or separate strategic initiatives.	Most institutions did not explicitly link QR supplements to a measurable increase in "high-quality" outputs. Even if QR/SIRF helps, many institutions do not systematically track or attribute improvements in research outputs or quality specifically to these supplementary funds.
	Compelling evidence but not generalisable	**Indicative**	**Indicative**

CMO 25	**Context: QR business research element supports institutions to undertake research with business and industry**	**Mechanism: Partnerships and collaborations with business and leveraged investment in researchers.**	**Outcome: Increased leveraged investment and collaboration from business. Increased involvement of English institutions in partnership and networks across sectors.**
Evidence	21 of 25 institutions said ring-fenced "business research" funding, although small, is crucial for industry engagement, supporting key staff, covering overheads, and enabling partnerships by filling gaps left by full economic costing.	Representatives noted that QR funding has enabled joint studentships with industry, co-funded pilots, and innovation hubs. In several instances, modest internal match-funding has sparked multi-million-pound consortia, boosting regional and national research networks. Nine institutions specifically provided examples of how SIRF enabled them to attract industry investment and form partnerships/networks.	Evidence includes examples where the funding enabled the establishment of relationships that attracted industry investment. Nine institutions reported increased leveraged investment from businesses, and eight institutions highlighted their active involvement in partnerships and networks.
Limitations	The relatively small funding received by some institutions limits the overall impact of the QR Business Research element. Moreover, few institutions stated that lack of detailed reporting on ring-fenced budgets makes it hard to identify collaborations driven specifically by the business element (compared to wider SIRF).	A few institutions did not offer specific examples of leveraged investment, making it difficult to gauge consistency. Some smaller or teaching-focused institutions see their very limited business-research funding as a stepping stone to larger bids rather than a primary tool for industry engagement.	Industry investment was noted as not always covering the full costs of research. Some institutions benefit more from the funding than others and appear more oriented towards building relationships with industry.
	Compelling evidence	**Compelling evidence but not generalisable**	**Compelling evidence but not generalisable**

CMO 26	**Context: SIRF allows Institutions to invest in development of cross-sector, interdisciplinary and international networks and partnerships**	**Mechanism: Researchers working with collaborators and partnership unlocks additional funding for research**	**Outcome: More funding is available for research. Successful collaborations attract further investment and collaboration.**
Evidence	Instead of tying funds to specific projects, many institutions reported using SIRF to fund pilots, staff, and infrastructure—signalling commitment and lowering risk for partners. 20 institutions identified SIRF's flexible core funding as the critical enabler for leveraging additional investment through these partnerships. 12 research intensive institutions used SIRF to seed new interdisciplinary or industry collaborations, while eight smaller or teaching focused institutions used it to maintain key research roles supporting grant applications.	18 institutions emphasised that SIRF's greatest value lies in "pump-priming" relationships. 11 large, broad discipline institutions stated that small SIRF investments in workshops or pilots led directly to industry or charity match-funding, from prototype datasets to joint fellowships. 14 institutions said SIRF-supported core facilities enabled major capital bids; seven very large research intensive institutions noted co-investment models helped secure significant industry funding for labs and equipment.	Ten institutions quantified leveraged investments. 15 institutions noted enhanced reputations, with early wins deepening ties to global firms and foundations, sparking ongoing funding and expanding international networks.
Limitations	Some institutions either did not discuss leveraging SIRF for cross-sector partnerships or indicated it is difficult to attribute partnerships solely to SIRF. Some institutions also suggested that, while SIRF helps, additional funds from industry, charities, or government are still critical for large-scale network building.	Five smaller or specialist institutions indicated that while SIRF underpinned their ability to apply for external grants, they lacked the scale to convert pump-priming into large-scale partnerships. A few institutions mentioned that QR or SIRF's role in attracting external collaborators is either relatively small or not well understood outside academic circles, limiting its direct impact on partnership formation.	Seven institutions found it difficult to disentangle SIRF's role from mainstream dual-support funding, limiting precise attribution of outcomes. A few institutions pointed out that "success" in attracting additional investment can depend on factors like sector focus or geographic location, rather than SIRF alone.

	Compelling evidence but not generalisable	**Compelling evidence but not generalisable**	**Compelling evidence but not generalisable**

CMO 27	**<u>Context</u>: SIRF allows institutions to invest in infrastructure and facilities to attract talent and investment from other sources.**	**<u>Mechanism</u>: Talented researchers are attracted by the opportunity to work in high quality research facilities. Other research organisations are able to access and share facilities through involvement in collaborations/partnerships.**	**<u>Outcome</u>: Increased attractiveness of England as a location for R&I talent. Increase in number and diversity of postgraduate research students.**
Evidence	All (20 out of 20) institutions confirmed using RCIF through centralise funding via a capital committee using block grants to support shared high-value research infrastructure.	Eight institutions mentioned that high-quality facilities help attract talented researchers. Five institutions described that facilities are shared through partnerships, which can promote new collaborations.	Three institutions explicitly mentioned that infrastructure investment supports an increase in both the number and diversity of postgraduate research students. Interviewees noted that world-class facilities help attract high-quality researchers and, by extension, postgraduate students.
Limitations	Several institutions noted that RCIF funding alone is insufficient to meet overall capital needs and must be supplemented with other funding sources. Variability exists across institutions in how much RCIF contributes to overall infrastructure investment. Nuance: We find examples of research- and STEM-heavy institutions needing lab equipment to be purchased and maintained. We also find examples of institutions with campuses built in the 50-60s that are seeing their buildings having reached the end of their lifecycles and need significant repairs / replacements.	Examples provided by some institutions remain at the pilot stage due to challenges with cost recovery, insurance, and specialist staffing, which hinder large-scale cross-institutional networks. Some responses indicate minimal allocations for certain digital or shared equipment, limiting the impact of the collaboration mechanism.	Not all institutions provided clear, measurable attribution of these outcomes solely to RCIF investments. Evidence is limited in scope, making it challenging to quantify the direct impact on postgraduate student numbers and diversity.
	Compelling evidence but not generalisable	**Compelling evidence but not generalisable**	**Indicative**

CMO 28	**Context: The business and charity support elements of QR are allocated to institutions that perform research with charities and businesses. This incentivises institutions to invest in capacity to carry out this kind of research and build relevant networks, to secure further funding.**	**Mechanism: Institutions seek opportunities to carry out research with charities and businesses, if these support their institutional goals.**	**Outcome: Institutions carry out research with charities and businesses, generating income and research outcomes. This in turn can lead to generation of impact in line with business or charity goals.**
Evidence	17 of the 23 institutions highlighted that ring-fenced QR support effectively bridges the gap left by charity and business grants that cover only direct costs. These institutions explained that QR allocations fund vital infrastructure, overheads, and partnership staff, enabling otherwise unfeasible collaborations. For instance, large institutions noted that without the Charity Research Support Fund, costly research (e.g., medical) and spin-out projects wouldn't be possible.	Four large research intensive institutions said QR top-ups go beyond cost recovery, boosting strategic business case and scaling partnerships into impactful programmes. Of these, one institution credited QR with turning charity pilots into lasting, societal outcome-driven initiatives. Two STEM-focused institutions called QR top-ups essential—one for sustaining charity-funded research and relationships, the other for bridging the gap left by charity grants.	Four institutions explicitly noted that QR support leads to measurable income and outcomes, e.g. one said charity QR "makes charity investment viable," while another noted that "charity recovers ~60% of costs," making the Charity Research Support Fund vital. two institutions described how charitable projects contribute to the UK's broader R&D and can eventually generate commercial or societal impact in line with funder goals.
Limitations	Some institutions highlighted that charitable funders often do not cover full economic costs; while QR support helps, it may still be insufficient for certain large-scale or specialised projects. A few institutions noted they have minimal charitable income and thus do not rely heavily on charity QR.	Some mid-sized and smaller teaching-focused institutions found charity elements of QR funding helpful but limited, describing it as "useful but not transformational." They highlighted that although QR helps cover overheads, institutional strategic goals and academic interests often guide external engagement.	Some institutions underscored the necessity of charity QR but did not provide concrete data on final outcomes or measurable impact. One specialised institution reported that its emerging research base has yet to generate significant charity income but still sees QR top-ups as foundational to any future expansion of externally funded work. The scale of income and outcomes differs significantly across institutions,

			depending on their research focus and the availability of willing business/charity partners.
	Compelling evidence but not generalisable	**Compelling evidence but not generalisable**	**Indicative**

CMO 29	**Context: Researchers have access to initiatives and facilities funded by SIRF for knowledge sharing activities.**	**Mechanism: Institution invest in initiatives and facilities that facilitate knowledge sharing including public engagement with other organisations who perform research.**	**Outcome: Increased use of research by end users and other researchers.**
Evidence	Ten institutions reported investment in initiatives and facilities that facilitate knowledge sharing. Representatives from institutions have provided examples where SIRF covers overhead costs for small teams that support such initiatives.	15 institutions mentioned knowledge sharing activities supported by SIRF, such as conferences, workshops, collaborative projects, and community engagement. Interview responses indicate that SIRF supports investments in initiatives underpinning various knowledge sharing activities. Some institutions found that public engagement formed the basis for partnering for future research projects.	A recurring theme in the interviews is that a modest slice of SIRF underwrites the "engagement infrastructure" that turns research into something communities, policy-makers and industry can actually use. Five institutions reported increased use of research by end users, implying that knowledge sharing activities contribute to research impact.
Limitations	The funding for these activities is small, limiting the scale of initiatives. At least in one case, impact officers were said to have been led go due to financial pressures.	The extent to which SIRF directly drives public engagement or collaborative research is not fully evidenced. Some responses suggest that while SIRF enables knowledge sharing, the actual investment may be insufficient to cover large-scale initiatives. There is no evidence that this access translates into large-scale or sustained investments in knowledge sharing facilities.	Most institutions stated that tracing a straight, quantifiable line from QR-funded engagement staff to measurable increases in research utilisation is difficult. The impact on research uptake remains indirect and difficult to measure.
	Compelling evidence but not generalisable	**Compelling evidence but not generalisable**	**Indicative**

A.5. Extract of evidence in the public domain

Table 7: Overview of findings from related studies

Source	Overview
QR_briefing_2024_final.pdf	This briefing highlights the impact of Quality-related research (QR) funding on UK universities. QR funding plays a crucial role in enabling universities to pursue high-risk, high-reward research, respond to new priorities, and invest in long-term strategic projects. It supports interdisciplinary research, early career researchers, and proof-of-concept projects.
International facts and figures 2023	Presents HE and research facts and figures and impact of R&D.
wipo.int/edocs/pubdocs/en/wipo-pub-2000-2023-en-main-report-global-innovation-index-2023-16th-edition.pdf	The Global Innovation Index 2023 captures the innovation ecosystem performance of 132 economies and tracks global innovation trends. It highlights top innovation economies by region and income group, and provides rankings based on various innovation metrics.
Invest 2035: the UK's modern industrial strategy - GOV.UK	This strategy outlines the UK government's vision for a modern industrial strategy, focusing on growth, stability, and investment in high-growth sectors. It aims to provide certainty for businesses to invest in long-term projects and includes plans for a statutory Industrial Strategy Council.
Opportunity, growth and partnership: a blueprint for change from the UK's universities	This blueprint by Universities UK sets out reforms to stabilise, mobilise, and maximise the contribution of UK universities to economic growth and widening opportunity. It includes recommendations for increasing funding for teaching, restoring the teaching grant, and boosting philanthropic giving.
The value of QR project - Bennett Institute for Public Policy	This project by the Bennett Institute of Public Policy investigates the contributions of QR funding by exploring practical examples from the University of Cambridge. It highlights QR's role in providing space for creativity, nurturing new ideas, establishing new researchers, and maintaining continuity in research careers and improving the stability of research careers and retaining expertise. The study also finds that QR supports the integration of teaching and research by allowing leading research academics to remain engaged in teaching.
MillionPlus-Industrial-Strategy-submission.pdf	This submission by MillionPlus emphasises the role of modern universities in driving regional economic growth and social mobility. It highlights barriers to growth related to skills, funding, and regional disparities, and calls for a financially sustainable higher education funding system.

A Review of QR Funding in English HEIs Process and Impact	This review by PACEC and the University of Cambridge demonstrates the value of QR funding to universities across England. It offers insights into the distribution and management of QR funding at an institutional level and highlights its importance in covering the full economic cost of research.
Research financial sustainability: issues paper – UKRI	This paper by UKRI addresses the long-term financial sustainability of the UK's research and innovation system. It highlights the need for sustainable financial management, funding that covers the full costs of research, and resilience to major fluctuations in income streams
Financial sustainability of higher education providers in England: November 2024 update	This report by the Office for Students provides an update on the financial sustainability of higher education institutions in England. It highlights challenges related to student recruitment, financial deficits, and the need for bold action to address these issues.
the_impact_of_qr_funding_for_uk_research_feb_2019.pdf	This report by UCL demonstrates the impact of QR funding on UK research, highlighting its role in supporting research excellence, covering the full economic cost of research, and enabling long-term strategic investments, amongst other.
Recurrent-Research-Funding-Across-United-Kingdom.pdf	This paper by the British Academy outlines the value of recurrent research funding in the UK higher education landscape, emphasising its importance for the SHAPE (Social Sciences, Humanities, and Arts for People and the Economy) disciplines.
Empowering UK universities: how strategic institutional support helps research thrive	Case studies on the impact of mainstream Quality-Related funding and Research Excellence Grants.
Universities: A crucial component of UK R&D	This document highlights key themes and case studies, expanding the evidence base on the value university R&D brings across the UK, and ultimately supporting the sector's advocacy for these vital institutions.
The dual funding structure for research in the UK: Research Council and funding council allocation methods and the pathways to impact of UK academics	In 2013, BIS (now DSIT) commissioned a report on the dual funding structure for research in the UK. This report identifies that within the dual support system, the share of Research Council funding has risen between 2002/03 and 2010/11 and that the share of mainstream QR funding has fallen over this period so that the former is now greater than the latter whilst 'other' QR has risen (from 3% to 9%).

Higher education funding: Trends and challenges	A 2024 review of HESA data suggests that “frozen domestic fee caps and inflation threaten the financial stability of higher education, with the number of universities in deficit expected to increase following new visa restrictions on international students.”
Financial sustainability of UK universities: PwC findings	A 2024 report identifying financial changes for UK institutions, including a slowdown in funding from grants, coupled with costs going up. “Universities are experiencing challenges with financial sustainability due to a decreased unit of funding for students from the UK”.
Financial sustainability of higher education providers in England: 2024	A 2024 independent view of the financial condition of the higher education sector and its resilience to financial challenge. Findings suggest that “sector’s financial data show that an increasing number of institutions will need to make significant changes to their funding model in the near future to avoid facing a material risk of closure”.