



Royal
Agricultural
University

Research and Knowledge Exchange Strategy 2026 to 2030



RAU Research and Knowledge Exchange Strategy 2026 to 2030

For over 180 years, the Royal Agricultural University (RAU) has been at the forefront of research and knowledge exchange to meet the changing needs of the land-based sector. Founded in 1845, the RAU established a reputation for methodical, practice-led research, with scientific advances in fertiliser application, manuring, botany, entomology, and agronomy - developed in our laboratories and on our farms - helping to transform agricultural practice over the following 180 years.

Today, research and knowledge exchange are central to the RAU's identity and global reputation. Since achieving full university status in 2013, we have strengthened our ambition to deliver world-class research that drives sustainable transformation across the land-based sector. Our founding purpose - to care for the land – continues to guide our mission amid profound sustainability challenges, such as climate resilience, nature recovery, food security, clean water, human health and wellbeing, and thriving communities.

To realise our ambition, the RAU will increase both the quality and volume of our research output, with a strong focus on delivering impactful outcomes for the land-based sector, deepening understanding of land systems and generating and disseminating evidence that addresses the current and future global sustainability challenges. Therefore, we aim for around 75% of the University's academic staff to have significant responsibility for research and for 75% of our research to achieve international or world-leading quality as defined by REF2029.

World-leading research requires investment in world-class facilities. Our recent £6 million investment in the Land Laboratory Teaching Centre has equipped the RAU to support a wide range of research activities. The RAU will continue to develop our capacity to conduct research in real-world settings, including our work on living landscapes, using state-of-the-art laboratory and portable field equipment, and research based on campus at our living-land lab. We also value 'bottom-up' social science research that engages voices that are otherwise ignored, providing evidence for policy and thought leadership.

This Research Strategy builds on our heritage and directly supports the RAU's overarching strategic goals as set out in the University Strategy 2023-28.

Our Vision

Our vision is to be a global leader in the sustainable transformation of agriculture, land-use and the environment, through our research and knowledge exchange

Our Objectives

In alignment with the institutional strategy, the aim of this strategy is to facilitate sustainable transformation that addresses the current and future global challenges within our specialist land-based disciplines. Specific objectives to deliver our aims are:

Quality

1. To encourage a thriving research community environment and effective research support to enable our colleagues to achieve their full potential for securing funding and produce internationally recognised research outputs and impact case studies reflecting our specialist academic portfolio
2. To attract high-achieving post graduate research students and early career researchers wanting to study and work with us and our partners.
3. To provide appropriately equipped laboratory and other experimental facilities to ensure our researchers have access to the tools required for world-leading scientific inquiry.

Reach

4. To collaborate with our academic, industrial and global partners and society to increase our shared research and knowledge exchange capacity and impact globally.

Sustainability

5. To champion the importance of research and critical evaluation of sustainability solutions in the land sector including nature and technology-based solutions.
6. To develop a thriving knowledge exchange portfolio, including short courses and consultancy, that supports our KEF profile, our financial sustainability and raise awareness of our teaching and research activities

Measures of Success:

- Exceeding our previous proportion of research outputs and impact case studies assessed as internationally important or world-class.
- Increasing the number of academic staff recognised as leaders within their disciplines – as evidenced by indicators such as journal editorial roles, invited talks, external appointments, awards, successful collaborations and leadership of funded projects.
- Year-on-year increase in externally funded research and knowledge exchange activity, measured by volume of applications, awards and income.
- Increase our volume of research outputs that include industry or global TNE partners.

Strategy Overview

The RAU's Research Strategy is structured around development in four key themes:

- Research Excellence & Contribution to Knowledge
- Research Community
- Infrastructure & Research Support
- Responsible Research

These themes align our institutional ambitions with both the expectations of REF 2029 and the RAU's strategic goals of Quality, Reach and Sustainability (see Table below) and ensure that our research environment, culture, partnerships, facilities, and outputs collectively contribute to the University's aspiration to become the UK's global leader in sustainable farming and land management research.

The REF plays a central strategic role in shaping the RAU's research. As a national assessment of research quality, the REF determines both the international standing of a university's research and the allocation of quality-related (QR) research funding. By integrating REF-aligned approaches into our institutional priorities, the RAU strengthens its capacity to deliver high-quality research, expand its global influence and maintain a long-term commitment to responsible and sustainable research practice.

Theme	RAU Institutional Goals Alignment	REF 2029 Alignment
Research Excellence & Contribution to Knowledge	Quality: Drives high-quality, internationally recognised research outputs. Reach: Enhances global academic and sector visibility through impactful research and gaining a global reputation for excellence and leadership in research	- Excellence of outputs (originality, significance, rigour) contributing to knowledge and understanding (CKU) - Evidencing impact through demonstrable real-world change
Research Community	Quality: Builds the capabilities and skills needed for world-leading research. Reach: Develops a diverse research community with strong national/international engagement. Expands global, industry and policy partnerships. Sustainability: Ensures long-term resilience through talent development and inclusive cultures.	- Strategy, People & Research Environment (SPRE) element - Support for ECRs, inclusive cultures, researcher development - Evidence of positive research environments and equitable practice
Infrastructure & Research Support	Quality: Enables robust, rigorous research through high-quality facilities. Sustainability: Invests in long-term infrastructure for a resilient research environment.	- Demonstrating institutional investment in the research environment and enabling infrastructure - Infrastructure, facilities and digital resources enabling excellence in outputs and impact - High-quality research support services and governance
Responsible Research	Sustainability: Embeds sustainable, ethical and responsible research practice across the institution including research-led teaching.	- Impact and engagement beyond academia - Responsible research practices, integrity and ethics - Sustainability considerations within research environments

Research Excellence & Contribution to Knowledge

Research Agenda

As a land-based specialist University, the RAU maintains a research agenda centred on the sector, rather than seeking a comprehensive research outlook. This strategic focus enables us to develop the depth, quality and impact of research outputs for sustainable transformational in the land-based sector.

Within this land-based specialism, there remains significant scope for multi- and cross-disciplinary research, supported through engagement with a broad range of research funders and by fostering partnerships with other universities and research institutions nationally and internationally. This collaborative approach ensures that our research is innovative and responsive to global challenges.

Our scope of research reflects our specialist academic portfolio in the following academic subject clusters:

- Agriculture and food science
- Equine
- Environment
- Land and property
- Business
- Cultural Heritage and Archaeology

Research Excellence Framework (REF)

The REF is central to the RAU's research strategy, serving as a national benchmark for research quality. It affects our international standing and the allocation of quality-related (QR) research funding allocated from Research England. While REF is an important indicator of research excellence, the University recognises that some research may be undertaken that may not directly contribute to the REF submissions.

In REF2021, 52% of the RAU's submitted research was assessed as internationally important or world-leading, placing us broadly in line with our peer group of other agricultural universities, though below the level of agricultural departments in Russell Group universities. A total of 16.8 FTE academics (28% of staff) were submitted as having significant responsibility for research (SRR).

Following a significant increase in research-active academic staff (and thus defined as having significant research responsibilities) we aim to increase the proportion of submitted academics to around 75% in REF2029. With a greater emphasis on research excellence and the research environment at the RAU, this strategy supports a higher level of achievement than in REF2021. We plan to be able to submit the full number of outputs, impact case studies, and have a clear strategy, people and research environment which together score

75% as internationally or world class significant.

We are committed to submit to REF2029 a representative selection of outputs from our academic staff. It is our intention to submit to two Units of Assessment (UoA):

- UoA 6 Agriculture, Food and Veterinary Sciences
- UoA 14 Geography and Environmental Studies or UoA 7 Earth Systems and Environmental Sciences

Research Outputs

The RAU encourages all academic staff where possible, to produce high-quality (internationally important or world-leading) research outputs. We place particular emphasis on disseminating research findings in peer-reviewed papers, ensuring our research work reaches an appropriate academic audience, but also will support other forms of research outputs, such as reports, digital media, long-form publications, books and book chapters that contribute to their disciplines and to the University's strategic research objectives. Staff are expected to record their research outputs on the RAU repository.

While the RAU does not specifically require high volumes of outputs from our academic staff, we do maintain a clear focus on producing internationally important and world-leading research, aligned with our strategic goals and expectations under the REF. High-quality and high-impact outputs are central to enhancing the University's reputation, strengthening external partnerships and ensuring that our research has a global reach.

The RAU is committed to supporting open access publication, recognising its importance in improving research accessibility and reach. We encourage publication through both the 'green route' and through the payment of Article Processing Charges (APCs) where appropriate. For this purpose, the RAU maintains 'read-and-publish' agreements with several journal publishers, enabling open-access when the corresponding author is affiliated with the RAU. Our library provides support and guidance to academic staff on open access publishing requirements, helping them make informed decisions and ensure compliance with REF policies.

Research Impact and the Knowledge Exchange Framework

The RAU has always valued its contribution to applied research and thought leadership. Both make a significant contribution to knowledge exchange, through industrial and civic society collaboration, policy development, and influence. We consider that our research has significant impact in the agricultural and land sectors and we encourage the active engagement of our staff to share their knowledge, expertise and research widely. This might include, for example, improving agricultural or rural business productivity, reducing carbon footprints, restoring natural landscapes, helping rural regeneration or protecting the historic environment. Our impact-driven research lies at the centre of our work. We will actively track success through publication impact, project outcomes, research finances, and impact case study development.

The University is a contributor to national and international policy development. This might include high-level policy advice and thought leadership, through government or parliamentary engagement, active membership of professional bodies or charitable organisations. We encourage our staff to share their expertise in thought leadership, through external committee or council membership (such as UN, government, parliamentary and NGO's)

We support links with industry through knowledge exchange and encourage academics to seek out and work with industry, rural entrepreneurs, policymakers, NGO's and other stakeholders. We encourage our academics to attend conferences and disseminate their research findings. We will facilitate the production of media materials, web pages and blogs that can record ongoing research in a dynamic and accessible way. In our philosophy of openness, we will encourage the public understanding of our research, especially to a global audience, through media engagement, web-based outputs and publications

The annual Knowledge Exchange Framework (KEF) is one measure of our knowledge exchange activity. The KEF-5 outcome confirmed that we continue to outperform other small specialist universities, and we aim to remain in the top rankings of the STEM cluster.

Research Community

Fostering a Research Culture

As a small community of academic researchers with wide-ranging interests, we aim to foster relationships across disciplines to develop innovative research ideas for tackling the global challenges facing the land-based sector.

Achieving excellence in research requires a strong, inclusive and collaborative research culture. The RAU's size allows us to operate as an interdisciplinary cross-university community, bringing together academics specialising in the natural sciences, social sciences and humanities. We expect all our academic staff to contribute to the development of a shared research culture at the RAU, even though they may not be formally classified as SRR.

We will provide a programme of activities to support and strengthen our research culture. An annual postgraduate research symposium offers our PGRs an opportunity to showcase their research work with the wider academic community. Our fortnightly University research seminars feature external and internal speakers across different academic fields on a wide range of land-based topics, ensuring regular intellectual exchange and discussions across disciplines.

The University operates informal research groups with flexible membership, so that academic staff and research students may be members of several. These research groups map onto the REF Units of Assessment and will form the basis of our narrative environment statements.

Securing Research Degree Awarding Powers

The University has had an active postgraduate research community since the 1990's validated by external universities and now has ambitions to award its own research degrees at masters' and doctoral levels. We believe that we have a sustained self-critical research environment, academic research quality and robust quality assurance, and will be applying to the Office for Students for this approval during 2026.

We believe that acquiring these powers will benefit our research community allowing for a more flexible specialist approach to research, and to expand our global reach of research students, especially where we already have TNE Partnerships.

Developing Research-Active Academics

The RAU has successfully progressed from a predominantly teaching-focused university with limited research income into one where research funding, peer-reviewed research publication and scholarly activity are now the norm for our academic staff. It is our aim by 2028, to achieve at least 75% research-active staff from total academic staff numbers.

In 2024, the RAU introduced three academic pathways to clarify academic roles and support the development of research-active academics. The 'Teaching and Research Pathway' applies to staff whose responsibilities encompass both research and teaching, requiring a clear research plan, proactive research funding applications, and the production of high-quality (internationally important or world-leading) peer-reviewed research articles. Our 'Research pathway' facilitates research fellows and senior research fellows to work primarily on funded research projects. The 'Teaching and Scholarship Pathway' commonly used in specialist universities, values the knowledge and technical expertise of professional specialists. Together, these pathways recognise a diversity of strengths in advanced scholarship with a strong emphasis on research engagement and knowledge exchange for most academic staff. Staff on the teaching and research, and research pathways (if they are independent) are classified as 'significant responsibility for research' and will be defined in our Code of Practice. Our staff policy provides for flexibility to transfer between pathways.

Effective academic workload management is central to achieving research excellence. In 2024, we developed a workload model (WLM) that supports the three pathways, with lower teaching allocations for SRR academics, to enable them to develop unfunded research. The WLM is maintained annually with real-time data, is transparent and accessible to all academics.

This workload model has a defined allocation for each PGR student supervised. Academic workload is also recognised through externally funded research grants. The model helps protect dedicated research time and ensures that funded research is recognised on a pro-rata basis. Academics outline their research plans, knowledge exchange activities, and goals during their annual appraisal, with support from their line manager. Wherever possible, research-active academics have at least one day during the work week clear of scheduled teaching to concentrate on research and scholarship.

Early Career Researchers

The RAU is committed to nurturing the next generation of research-active academic staff, who are the lifeblood of Higher Education in the land-based sector. Academics appointed as Early Career Researchers (ECR's) receive a 30% work-load reduction to support the development of their research and KE activities. They are encouraged to publish their doctoral and post-doctoral research and to apply for UKRI, ERC and other schemes linked to ECR career development. A mentoring programme for ECRs and PGR supervisor training provides further support as they establish their research careers.

We have adopted a 'grow-our-own' approach by funding research and teaching fellowships that incorporate part-time PhD study with part-time teaching. The expectation is that they will progress to roles as postdoctoral research associates (PDRAs), postdoctoral teaching fellows (PDTFs), or lecturers at the RAU.

It is our intention to join the Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers during the strategy period.

Student Involvement

At the RAU, we involve our undergraduate and postgraduate students in our research, from arrival through to graduation. Our research-led teaching embeds our academic research in the curriculum, offering students opportunities to work on cutting-edge research projects and real-world challenges under the guidance of academic staff. We include independent research elements in taught programmes, conducted by the student, that engage them in real-world projects and research initiatives. Publication of high-quality student research projects is encouraged.

Collaborative Partnerships

As a specialist university, the RAU often operates effectively through partnerships with other institutions and organisations in the UK and internationally. We will continue to explore new partnerships both in the UK and internationally.

By contributing our expertise to large research projects, including several multi-million-pound projects, we have secured significant research funds. We encourage our academics to pursue international research collaborations through Horizon Europe and other partnership frameworks or funding calls. Our twinning arrangement with Sumy National Agrarian University (Ukraine) exemplifies our commitment to developing and deepening research links with an overseas partner, which led to the award of a Defra grant for researching soil damage caused by the war in Ukraine.

Our connections with our transnational education (TNE) partnerships in China, Uzbekistan, Ukraine and the United Arab Emirates provide research opportunities beyond teaching delivery, especially where our staff are working overseas and can access our partners

facilities. These partnerships enable joint research supervision, co-authored publications, and cross-cultural activities, such as joint research symposia, that enrich the RAU's global outlook and the University's global research reputation.

Infrastructure & Research Support

Research Facilities and Equipment

The RAU intends to expand its research facilities and refresh its equipment. A significant investment (more than £6 million) for our new Land Laboratories, experimental barn, and greenhouses, to provide for six dedicated laboratories, with new equipment for both teaching and research. Recently acquired equipment includes pXRF analysers for rapid measurement of soil contamination a portable Gasmeter system for real-time gas measurement, including greenhouse gases and a digital microscope with a laser ablation head. These instruments have already been used in our research projects, including to measure soil pollution associated with the war in Ukraine. We aim to expand our suite of analytical and field equipment to support research projects, partly through foundation support.

The RAU benefits from our field research sites. Our 185-ha regenerative farm located at Coates, adjacent to the campus, provides an excellent platform for plot, field, and farm-scale experimentation. It also supports linking research projects into the curriculum (research-informed teaching) by enabling our students to engage directly with live research trials and sustainable land management practice.

Additional on-campus research plots, at the Steadings, offer space for field-based agricultural experimentation, while the proximity of the RAU-managed vineyard provides further opportunities.

Research Support Services

The RAU is committed to supporting researchers with a professional research support service. We will ensure that academics are equipped to develop high-quality project bids, manage projects and maximise the impact of their research.

We aim to provide a structured programme of support for developing research bids. This includes professional guidance on bid preparation, financial planning, and compliance. Academics are also supported in allocating their time to bid development through their work-load allocation, and in discussion with their line managers. We organise regular briefing sessions on developing grant applications and provide an agile service to support academics to make applications.

The RAU Research Office offers hands-on support to academics throughout the full research funding lifecycle. They coordinate the development of competitive bids, prepare budgets, ensure compliance with funder requirements, and manage the end-to-end submission process. Following a successful project award, the RAU will provide robust post-award financial and project management support to academic staff

Responsible Research

Research Integrity

The RAU is committed to supporting research integrity across the institution and where we are working with our research partners and collaborators. We subscribe to the five pillars of research integrity – honesty, rigour, transparency and open communication, care and respect and accountability. We intend to develop a research integrity policy during 2026, and to make a return to UKCORI during academic year 2025-26.

We expect our researchers to record their research in a professional manner – through for example contemporaneous laboratory books (physical or virtual), datasets-stamped spread sheets and word documents and meta-data recorded photography,

Ethics

The RAU aims to establish and promote amongst both staff and students, good ethical practice in the conduct of academic research as set out in the University's Policy for Research Ethics. All research conducted by RAU academics is expected to conform to the highest ethical standards of integrity, honesty, and legality within our agreed ethical framework. This involves the submission of an ethics form for each research project for review by the University Ethics committee.

Data Management and Storage

We expect our researchers to create data management plans, where they have collected significant bodies of data in their projects, or are required to do so by funders such as UKRI. It is an expectation that research that involves personal data will be anonymised and that any key for the identification subjects will be delated as soon as possible or stored in a secure and separate location. We will delete research data held at the University after a reasonable period of time, to support environmental sustainability and information security unless there is a compelling reason not to do so. We subscribe to the principals of open data where-ever possible, ensuring that it is accessible to external users, where appropriate, through central storage such as the RAU repository, and the effective cataloguing any the recording of metadata. We accept that there may be cases where research data cannot be made publicly available, for example where there are security concerns or commercial sensitivity. It is our intention to be become a signatory to the Concordat on Open Research Data during the strategy period.

Fostering equality, diversity and inclusion

The RAU is committed to equality, diversity and inclusion. Our academic community brings together a wide range of global traditions and perspectives, and we seek to ensure that diverse voices, particularly from underrepresented rural communities in Britain and internationally, are meaningfully included within our research.

We support 'bottom-up' social science research approaches that engage with societal voices

that are otherwise ignored. This approach underpins much of our research, and many of our research grants have embraced this approach, and which we want to encourage. Our role in the establishment of a UK '[farmer-led innovation](#)' movement is an example of this, in which we host 25 universities and organisations, and where we have informed research policy, such as the UKRI Farming Innovation Programme. Internationally, the 'Giving us Voice' project, in collaboration with the University of Dar es Salaam, demonstrates inclusive research by engaging with artisanal fishers on the Tanzanian coast and their responses to climate change.

Sustainability

Sustainability underpins all our research activity at the RAU. At a strategic level, our research maps onto several of the UN Sustainable Development Goals including SDG 2 Zero hunger, SDG 11 Sustainable cities and communities and SDG 15 Life on land. We support the RAU's inclusion in the *Times Higher Education* Impact Awards.

We will incorporate practical sustainability actions into our research, such as carbon footprint reduction through sustainable travel, energy efficient laboratories, waste reduction, and the use of sustainable materials. It is our intention to be a signatory to Concordat for the Environmental Sustainability of Research and Innovation Practice during the strategy period.

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