

Submission to the Higher Education Commission's Public Call for Evidence: University Research & Regional Levelling-up Inquiry

Respondent information:

1. Dr Annette Bramley, Director, N8 Research Partnership (N8) and Dr Peter O'Brien, Executive Director, Yorkshire Universities (YU).
2. The N8 Research Partnership and Yorkshire Universities (YU) together represent 17 higher education institutions (HEIs) in the north of England. Our members make major contributions towards the UK's research and innovation base. They are also critical institutions in supporting local and regional development, and act as key anchor institutions underpinning place-making in many cities, towns and communities across the north.
3. The N8 Research Partnership (N8) is a strategic collaboration between the universities of Durham, Lancaster, Leeds, Liverpool, Manchester, Newcastle, Sheffield, and York, and aims to maximise the impact of this research base to enable business innovation and societal transformation.
4. Yorkshire Universities (YU) is a regional network of universities in Yorkshire and the Humber, with a specific focus on strengthening the role and contribution of higher education to place-based development in the region.
5. We give permission for the Commission to quote our submission.
6. The submission may be attributed jointly to the N8 Research Partnership (N8) and Yorkshire Universities (YU).
7. The submission may be attributed to Dr Annette Bramley on behalf of the N8 Research Partnership (N8) and Dr Peter O'Brien on behalf of Yorkshire Universities.

1. Allocating funding to maximise R&D activity and economic impact

- 1.1. We are more comfortable referring to the issue of R&D activity as research and innovation (R&I), which extends beyond the narrow parameters of R&D, with its origins and close associations to technology-led solutions.
- 1.2. To ensure that the UK's research and innovation system continues to be one of the best in the world, funding should be efficiently and effectively delivered.
- 1.3. UKRI has a track record of being an efficient (low overheads) and effective mechanism for disbursing public funds for research within and across different disciplines and thematic areas. This expertise should be leveraged to support the regions and economic impact, and maximise resource going into front-line research and innovation.
- 1.4. There are inevitably some areas that are worthy of further improvement, particularly in strengthening the diversity of the UK's research and innovation base. Place, in this context, is one important dimension of diversity, and which has grown in value and significance as a feature of public policy in recent years.

- 1.5. Research capacity and funding are not sufficiently spatially-distributed in the UK. This reinforces imbalances and inequalities in the UK economy, and is an opportunity cost for a government that is seeking to level up, improve UK productivity and reach stated R&D investment targets.
- 1.6. To maximise socio-economic impact, the potential for R&I funding to leverage local and regional strengths, context, profile and ambition could play a greater part in the strategic and delivery plans of funding agencies.
- 1.7. There should be a greater emphasis – including at national system and funding levels – on place and developing regional R&I ecosystems, which engage partners in the public and private sectors, as well as local citizens and communities and promote knowledge flow within and between LEP boundaries. An approach which couples the local to the regional offers most benefit to the national economy and the opportunity for global Britain.
- 1.8. R&I is a key feature of regional policy, but it is not a silver bullet, and is one of a suite of tools, to be used over the long-term, to help address what are in the UK are some of the [largest inequalities between regions amongst OECD member states](#).
- 1.9. The role of the public purse in this case is to support the “crowding-in” of research and innovation funding, to kick-start private investment, build the collaboration networks and support places to leverage their assets and create a healthy, growing innovation ecosystems.
- 1.10. Local governments, or multi-local authority entities, such as (mayoral) combined authorities or local enterprise partnerships are not well-equipped to undertake the role of direct research (low technology readiness level i.e. 1-4) funder, and do not have access to the necessary expertise or infrastructure to draw on to make efficient and informed decisions in the context of other research being carried out worldwide. The perspective can be too local, and these entities are often forced into unhelpful competition with each other for funding.
- 1.11. However, such organisations do have expert knowledge of the local innovation ecosystems, and economic structures that need to be better connected to the research base for a more effective and balanced R&I system in the UK. There is a strong case for a greater proportion of the national innovation funding to be deployed through routes which draw on these organisations’ expertise during inception and decision-making, and fit with wider strategic plans.
- 1.12. This would enable the creation and strengthening of clusters; a more systemic view of the local innovation ecosystems and for a more joined up local skills ecosystem. The importance of skills for innovation is covered in a later question, as is the role of UKRI and other national funders.
- 1.13. Recognising the uneven geography of R&I funding matters, we also believe that there are other processes that are needed to help make effective use of more R&I investment in places outside the ‘Golden Triangle’. This is essential when the case for increasing public R&I funding needs to be made alongside other public spending commitments.

- 1.14. For example, recent investments in hydrogen infrastructure in Teesside and in the North West did not include the R&I capability that will be required to address the known research needs, or funding for the skills training that will be required for the green workforce of the future.
- 1.15. National programmes should not be one-size fits all, they should be informed by regional knowledge. Devolution to growing numbers of more (mayoral) combined authorities, particularly in the North of England, along with regional recovery and growth plans means that the imperative to align R&I projects and programmes to these is essential to maximise the return on government investment.
- 1.16. National research and innovation funders, including UKRI, but also government departments and the National Institute for Health Research could usefully draw more on the expertise of local governments, or multi-local authority entities, such as combined authorities or local enterprise partnerships during inception and decision-making for particular schemes and calls for proposals, in addition to the expertise of individual academic researchers or business people.
- 1.17. Greater weight should be placed on the support and engagement of regional stakeholders in decision-making in relation to strategic innovation investments.
- 1.18. We would encourage UKRI and other national agencies funding research and innovation, including NIHR and Government Departments, to undertake a number of steps, including:
 - Review definitions of excellence to reflect the value of collaborative research which is locally embedded and impactful. Conventional peer review methods, which are accustomed to traditional measures of excellence, should be reviewed for funding schemes for which other factors are also strategically important.
 - Invest more in collaboration building activities between universities and different sectors as a precursor to collaborative R&I programmes and allow more time for new collaborations to be built;
 - Be more ambitious in their use of funding schemes in relation to the place agenda, with an increased number of awards which are each at a scale which can make a tangible difference over the long-term (at least £25M);
 - Taking place-based considerations into more of their strategic large investments;
 - Supporting local programmes, building on the recent place-based partnerships call to support co-design and citizen engagement;
 - Introducing programmes that facilitate local networks relating to areas of local strength;
 - Connecting more R&I funding to local and regional economic strategies and devolved authorities, which can help shape and inform long-term research ambition;

- Draw more on the expertise of bodies such as N8, YU and other regional university consortia to inform place-based strategy and in decision-making.

2. Enabling R&I output through skills provision and training

- 2.1. The R&I system and the UK economy overall is failing to mobilise and utilise all the talent that exists in places and universities in the northern regions and elsewhere. This talent could contribute towards helping the government reach its 2.4% GDP R&I target and help the UK address its productivity challenge.
- 2.2. Adoption, diffusion and commercialisation of innovation requires that the workforce of the future needs to have the skills and awareness to understand the potential benefits to businesses of innovation, particularly those that will help us to reach net zero by 2050.
- 2.3. Better integration of the skills pipeline in places is needed, from further education, apprenticeships, graduate, Masters and Doctoral levels, to produce the skilled workforces within clusters that will make the UK an attractive place to locate and grow businesses, contributing to the Government's ambition of a Global Britain. Strong clusters will in turn attract skilled workers to places and reinforce the R&I output of those places.
- 2.4. To enable the governments' vision of lifelong learning as set out in the Further Education White Paper, some new mechanisms of funding innovative collaborations between FE and HE in the regions are needed to produce the highly skilled workforces needed by places now, and for the future green economy.
- 2.5. A transfer of some resource from the Department of Education to UKRI specifically for programmes of education at technical and Master levels which are directly related to strategic place-based research and innovation investments would help address a weakness in the current system and directly support cluster development.
- 2.6. Devolution of resource from DfE to local governments, or multi-local authority structures to fund FE-HE collaborations in place might enable more place-based integration of skills.

3. Potential of devolution to increase R&I output

- 3.1. Local leaders, in particular Metro Mayors, can play an important role in advocating the value and contribution of increased R&D activity within local and regional recovery plans, and in promoting specific places as innovation hotspots.
- 3.2. As a key foundation of improved productivity, we do need to see increased levels of research and innovation investment and activity in the regions with the benefits of; creating and diffusing knowledge for new and existing businesses, driving more and better jobs in the regions; attracting inward investment and talent because of the fantastic quality of life, combined with professional opportunities, data, analysis and innovation to improve our public services. This means creating local and regional innovation ecosystems which link universities with prime industries and smaller businesses and with foundational sectors and services such as local government, health, transport or the police, as well as local communities.

- 3.3. A key principle of devolution is that decisions and policies are made at the most appropriate spatial level, and that there is scope in which to formulate, align and/or integrate specific interventions around a particular geographical area.
- 3.4. Any devolution of R&I funding would need to be made at an appropriate spatial level. For the reasons outlined in section 1 we believe that devolution of research powers and funding to the localities is not the optimal spatial level.
- 3.5. We do believe that there is an opportunity to devolve some innovation funding at a sub/city-regional and regional level to help address the spatial imbalances in R&I funding, while retaining sufficient scale to promote pan-regional knowledge flows and to encourage collaboration between local areas, rather than competing for funds.
- 3.6. Increasing R&D activity will require the private sector to increase its investment. We would encourage Mayors and Combined Authorities to feature R&D within their trade and investment, and skills and enterprise, strategies, and work with local universities in a systematic and strategic manner to attract and leverage national and international R&D investment into the regions.
- 3.7. We understand that the government is considering rolling out new innovation deals. Connecting innovation interventions to other economic development activities makes perfect sense, and there is real merit in providing long-term funding and support for projects and programmes in the regions.
- 3.8. Universities and similar institutions would be key actors in these initiatives. We would advise the government and local actors to draw upon the lessons of other previous and existing forms of 'deal-making' and ensure that innovation deals align with existing deals, especially those featuring skills and infrastructure elements. Otherwise, there is a risk of fragmentation in strategy and implementation.

4. Enabling pan-regional collaboration between universities and industry on innovation

- 4.1. Research, development, translation and innovation, from the research base to industry, all need to be co-located within clusters which are well placed to interact and share information with other nearby clusters.
- 4.2. As anchor institutions, universities are well-positioned to support their local places and the wider knowledge economy through their research and innovation activities, but this needs to be part of a wider innovation eco-system. A multi-university approach is more likely to reach different communities and businesses within and across particular geographies, including those people and places that have to date had limited engagement with innovation activity.
- 4.3. Innovations and businesses of the future will emerge at the interfaces between sectors and technologies, so while it is necessary to invest in cluster development, on its own a very local strategy is not sufficient for long term prosperity.

- 4.4. The convening power of multi-university partnerships should not be underestimated- they are an efficient and effective way for businesses to access world-leading knowledge, trained people and research across a diversity of institutions. The skills to support and initiate collaboration exist within the partnering bodies of N8 and YU, but are generally under resourced; with more funding from government we could facilitate much more collaboration within and between sectors using mechanisms that have been demonstrated to be effective, e.g. Industry Innovation Forums (see below).
- 4.5. The publication of a new report by the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) on [Regional Policy and R&D](#) emphasises on the [value of regional university networks](#). In his 2020 report, [Strength in Diversity](#), Professor Graeme Reid recommended the creation of a new initiative designed to tap into the diversity of Wales' research and innovation capacity, through collaboration.
- 4.6. [Research and innovation in the North of England](#), published by Transport for the North, explores the strengths and challenges of the innovation eco-system in the region, and finds that there are some key differences between successful regional hubs in other regions and the eco-system in the North. Innovation eco-systems create communities and collaborative networks; London has a dense collaboration network, with other networks in the South, East and the Midlands. Such networks are less well developed in the North, making it harder for industry to access locally produced knowledge and acting as a barrier to improved outcomes.
- 4.7. There is an urban myth that greater mobility and fluidity of individual's careers between academia and businesses will enable more collaboration. While it is undoubtedly true that knowledge does flow through individuals and through relationships, there is no evidence that we are aware of that substantiates the claim that this is the key to unlocking collaboration or lead to an increase in R&I activity and more effective economic impact.
- 4.8. Collaboration is, however, a long-term investment in relationships. To enable better outcomes from collaboration between universities and industry, we need to invest in relationships and address the systemic factors that help or hinder these collaborations within and between regions. Understanding the cultural factors at play and using the right levers for the right intervention is essential.
- 4.9. Universities in the North of England are working collaboratively to strengthen local research and innovation eco-systems and link these with local development priorities and the long-term plans of sectors such as health, local government and police. Bodies such as N8 and YU are critical to brokering conversations between higher education institutions and other sectors, and breaking down barriers to collaboration, drawing together the collective endeavour and capacity of universities and local partners working as civic anchor institutions.
- 4.10. There are, however, a number of interventions which would support more collaboration between universities and businesses, where each party brings their A-game to the table, creating an endeavour which is 'more than the sum of its parts'. These include:

- **Industry Innovation Forums-** connect leading businesses with research intensive universities to create new collaborations for innovation and growth. These require resources to facilitate effectively, as work has to be done with both industry and academic partners to identify sectoral challenges requiring a research-led solution and bringing the right researchers to the collaboration.
- **Industry Clubs-** Research problems and challenges can be too big, too difficult, and too risky for individual companies to take on as this would mean exposure to unsustainable costs and resources. Industry Clubs can be a way to support academic-business partnerships and attract leverage on public funds.
- **Connecting capabilities (CCF)** has been very successful at sub-regional levels, generating the Northern Accelerator and Northern Gritstone. An expansion of this type of funding combined with incentives within the HE funding system that ‘reward’ and value multi-university collaborations and collaboration with businesses.
- **Funding for businesses** that incentivises collaboration with universities, like Industrial Case, helps to increase the demand side ‘pull’ for innovation as well as the push from the research base.

- 4.11. The universities in the ‘Golden Triangle’ are characterised by achieving a critical mass of excellence within a small geographical area. This correlation often leads to an assumption that collaborative research can only be established effectively across small geographies. The universities of the North of England may not always have critical mass in a thematic area within their own institution or local geography, but critical mass can be achieved through collaboration across a city-region, region and/or pan-region, drawing on the strengths of the universities and other partners.
- 4.12. The N8 Research Partnership has shown that thriving and successful collaborations can be built across broader geographies, given the appropriate support and resources. N8 AgriFood, N8 Industry Innovation Forums and N8 Policing Research Partnership are examples of collaboration building grants that have excelled; although the case for ‘Centre’ funding has proved more difficult to make across a wider geography under ‘standard’ funding routes.
- 4.13. Innovation takes place across the Northern Powerhouse, not only in the major cities. European Regional Development Funding has been a crucial enabler for R&I outside of the Golden Triangle, and the lack of clarity about how the proposed Shared Prosperity Fund (SPF) will operate casts doubt as to whether these collaborations will continue post-Brexit. We are concerned that it remains unclear if and how innovation will feature in the SPF.
- 4.14. One of the “unicorns” the UK has produced is a company called Blue PRISM, which started at the University of Lancaster, secured European funding in 2004 and took 14 years to become successful – now worth over a billion dollars. Blue Prism is a UK multinational software corporation that pioneered and makes enterprise robotic process automation (RPA) software that provides a digital workforce designed to automate complex, end-to-end operational activities- aligned to the 4th Industrial Revolution.

5. Maximise economic impact of ARIA by:

- focus on Climate Change, not only because this is the biggest crisis facing the planet, because low Carbon goods, products and services are going to be the biggest growth sectors worldwide over the next 20 years
- focus on collaboration, co-creation and diversity as this is where the most inventive solutions will come. This will also differentiate ARIA from the broader R&I ecosystem in the UK.
- foster R&I communities with strong leadership and shared values which encourage supported risk taking, building ideas up rather knocking them down through intense competition for resources; fair, transparent and rigorous assessment of potential for impact and breakthrough such that unproductive lines of inquiry can be closed down and resources redirected into more promising streams;
- have access to in-house IP expertise for rapid protection and exploitation of invention, and so that the UK taxpayer can share the benefits of the investment as well as the risks;
- make use of existing UKRI IT and back-office systems to release as much funding as possible for front-line invention and research activities.

6. Mechanisms and incentives for applied research and commercialisation

- 6.1. Prevent the further erosion of quality related (QR) funding which threatens the Government's ambition to become a science superpower. QR ensures there is a sustainable pipeline of new ideas and talent to underpin innovation in areas which may not yet have emerged as the global challenges of the future. This gives UK based business access to world leading talent and research and a competitive advantage compared with international competitors. Beyond Brexit, universities can be used as regional platforms to internationalise.
- 6.2. We need to improve our existing signposts to access finance for innovation and entrepreneurship: Any information for businesses about where to access new finance is helpful. One of the region-specific challenges is that parts of Yorkshire, such as Leeds City Region, have a very high concentration of SMEs, very few large original equipment manufacturers (OEMs) and the type of experience that comes with it that SMEs do not have, especially when it comes to working with universities.
- 6.3. Enabling access: Capacity building skills and knowledge about how to engage and work with investors is critical. Clubs and modules for students and broader community about 'blocking and tackling' are important. The Innovate UK-funded mechanism – I-cure – is a tool that universities can borrow and use, rather than reinventing the wheel and recreating.
- 6.4. Diversity is a big issue. People at different levels require various types of help and support. Anyone from any background could and should be able to become an innovative entrepreneur, and those with or without a degree should be able to do so. Access to pre-seed and seed capital is vital in accessing later-stage capital provided by public funds and

private investors. Without the right seed capital, start-ups and spinouts will not have access to a lot of public and private capital, initiatives, and funds in the first place. Access to finances therefore needs to be enabled at multiple stages. Universities can play a role in providing early-stage funding and other support.

- 6.5. Better use of established and emerging initiatives: Programmes like MIT REAP, LITE and CCF are instrumental initiatives, and have the potential to plug gaps. Northern Gritstone – launched by the universities of Leeds, Manchester and Sheffield – will see a new investment vehicle generate pre-accelerator funding and finance for investable projects. Northern Gritstone plans to raise up to £500 million from strategic corporate partners, institutional investors, and qualifying individuals to invest companies across areas such as advanced materials and manufacturing, health and life sciences, artificial intelligence, and data sciences. Elsewhere, the Northern Powerhouse Investment Fund will require local venture capitalists to be based on the ground and for decisions to be made locally. We need to explore what steps can be taken to strengthen the financial services sector in north of England cities that can finance innovation at scale.
- 6.6. Better utilising alumni networks, especially international alumni networks. Affinity groups in the USA are popular, but the culture is different in the UK. An angel syndicate for university alumni is being developed in the Midlands. Access to capital also means tapping into private and local authority pension funds. For example, networks of high value people.
- 6.7. Utilise the student talent coming through their courses and into entrepreneurship and with it attract more investors into the region. Moving it from a transactional / beneficiaries model to one of a deep and enduring partnership.
- 6.8. Creative and agile capabilities: We need to embed design thinking and creativity as early as possible; it is also an important capacity to fill gaps and reduce risks. Creative capabilities should be harnessed and leveraged into core capabilities.

7. Effective innovation funding:

- 7.1. National competitions, bidding for pots of money, which do not necessarily join up in places and localities is going in the opposite direction to what we need. What we do need is significant, stable long-term funding, and for more of it to be geographically sensitive and place-based.
- 7.2. The leverage needed to make a genuine place-based difference is significant. Each award should be a minimum of £25M to make a tangible difference in a place, there should be more awards, the awards should be of sufficient duration to demonstrate impact (at least 7 years) and the overall fund should be much larger than it currently is¹. Give that SIPF has a declared objective to fund activities which contribute towards significant relative regional economic growth i.e. having a significant impact locally that closes the gap between that region and the best nationally, it needs to deploy sufficient resource to make a material

¹ HoC (2019) 'Balance and effectiveness of research and innovation spending', Twenty-first report of Session 2017-19, House of Commons Science and Technology Committee: London.

difference. We would support the call for SIFP to be more flexible and to include support for the increasing the demand for innovation and the development of research and innovation infrastructure in particular places, perhaps on a programme rather than project basis.

- 7.3. Our funding estimate is based on experience in engaging stakeholders and budget holders (especially local and national government) within a defined 'place', to lead to coproduced research and innovation. The resources and time needed for building these relationships and understanding tends to be significantly underestimated- this leads to underpowered collaboration and/or funding those with existing relationships rather than forming transformative new ones.
- 7.4. To make transformational change, R&I funding awards with a place dimension should be significant in value and ambition, flexible and long-term. Regions with younger universities (such as the North of England) or fewer universities (the South West of England) tend to have less access to research and innovation funding. This may be due to perceptions of the 'excellence' of and/or density of research-intensive provision in these regions. Arguments to rebalance are met with outcry. As a result, funding schemes aimed at increasing the research infrastructure and capacity of regions with smaller but 'excellent' capabilities tend to be insufficiently resourced to achieve transformational change.
- 7.5. The current eligibility criteria for HEIF acts as a disincentive to encourage new forms of innovation by smaller institutions.
- 7.6. Other UKRI funding routes, including NetworkPlus, Portfolio Partnerships, Healthcare Impact Partnerships, Interdisciplinary Research Collaborations, Innovation and Knowledge Centres and Impact Acceleration Accounts have also had a significant and positive impact on increasing innovation output. Research England can usefully draw on the expertise and experiences of sister research councils in delivering innovation, alongside InnovateUK.

The N8 Research Partnership

The [N8 Research Partnership \(N8\)](#) is the strategic collaboration of the 8 research-intensive universities in the North of England (Durham, Lancaster, Leeds, Liverpool, Manchester, Newcastle, Sheffield, and York). Our members are major contributors to the UK's research and innovation base, and critical anchor institutions in their cities and regions, underpinning place-making across much of the North.

The N8 universities receive around 80% of competitively awarded research funding in the North of England, and contribute an estimated £8bn in GVA to the economy. By working together, we demonstrate a critical mass of research excellence which is able to compete with the best universities in the UK and globally. N8 universities also work in partnership with other universities in the Northern Powerhouse and beyond.

Founded in 2006, N8 aims to maximise the impact of its research base by promoting collaboration, establishing innovative research capabilities and programmes of national and international prominence, and driving economic growth. Our current collaborative programmes include:

[N8 AgriFood Resilience Programme](#) is developing and projecting the North of England as a world-leading research and innovation cluster tackling the global challenges of sustainable food production, resilient supply chains, and improving nutrition and public health. Launched in 2015, N8 AgriFood has created a range of new industrial and stakeholder partnerships, deployed evidence to influence policy at regional, national and international level, and generated strategic partnerships across the globe. It has also supported over 180 projects and secured over £40m of external funding.

[N8 Policing Research Partnership](#) is transforming the relationship between police and academics, bringing practical solutions to policing issues. A collaboration between the N8 universities and all 12 police forces in the North of England, innovation lies at the heart of the partnership: a challenge to all partners to do things differently, responding to social and technological change. N8 PRP is helping to unlock the complexities of modern challenges such as combatting terrorism, cybercrime and modern slavery, and addressing issues such as mental health.

The [N8 Centre of Excellence in Computationally Intensive Research](#) focuses on the development of expertise in CIR methods, skills and facilities. N8 CIR aims to extend the boundaries of the possible by: building communities of practice focused on N8 strategic research priorities; developing CIR skills across academic and research software engineer communities; developing shared software infrastructure; and facilitating access to the national e-Infrastructure ecosystem.

The [N8 Industry Innovation Forum](#) demonstrated the power of the 8 universities working together in attracting and developing industry-academic collaborations. The programme brought key industrialists and academics together in workshops to develop collaborative teams to address sectoral challenges in areas including advanced materials, industrial biotechnology, food security, and healthy ageing. Seed-corn funding was provided until teams were ready to submit proposals for funding from national schemes. To date, more than £10m of funding has been secured from the original investment of £1.6m.

DecarboN8 is an EPSRC funded network seeking to bring together business, government and academia across the North of England to create an innovation ecosystem and test bed environment to trial and accelerate the adoption of low carbon transport solutions. In working across the North, DecarboN8 is looking to take a place-based approach recognising that different solutions might be needed for different types of area – but also acknowledging that sometimes we might need this to be joined up and consistent in order to get benefits at scale.

Net Zero North is an investment-ready, business-university collaborative proposition that will support levelling-up and address the climate crisis. Bringing together Higher and Further Education institutions, working with industry, public sector and the public, Net Zero North proposes a unique pan-regional initiative to help all of the Northern Powerhouse, including left behind places, to develop a thriving clean economy, meet climate objectives, drive economic growth and create purposeful stable jobs.

Net Zero North will strengthen and complement previous government investments in infrastructure by leveraging our assets, providing know-how and creating a pool of skilled workers to attract inward investment. It is focussed around three priority areas: Skills and Productivity, Sustainable Hydrogen Economy, and Grow Smarter.

Yorkshire Universities

Founded in 1987, [Yorkshire Universities \(YU\)](#) is a cross-mission regional university network, charity and company limited by guarantee. YU represents eleven universities and one specialist higher education institution in Yorkshire and the Humber: the universities of Bradford, Huddersfield, Hull, Leeds, Leeds Arts, Leeds Beckett, Leeds Trinity, Sheffield, Sheffield Hallam, York, and York St John, together with Leeds Conservatoire. Together, these institutions contribute nearly £3bn per annum to the economy in Yorkshire, support employment totalling 56,000 jobs, and have 198,000 students enrolled.

YU's mission is centred on 'place-based development', and states that: "through our strategy, we will work collectively and collaboratively with partners to create more prosperous, inclusive and sustainable economies and communities in Yorkshire". YU's three-year (2019-22 strategy) focuses upon delivering activity against three key priorities, each with specific objectives, framed by an overall approach whereby YU seeks to 'think', 'convene' and 'deliver':

- 1. Ideas:** Strengthen HE contributions towards increased research and innovation activity in the region.
- 2. Talent:** Extend and deepen partnership to improve higher level skills pathways into continuous development and learning.
- 3. Communities:** Ensure universities / HE in the region are recognised as influential civic, anchor institutions.