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The role of cultural institutions in the UK's higher education research ecosystem

Research report

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Executive summary

Purpose

This study examines the nature, characteristics, and outcomes of collaborations between higher education institutions (HEIs henceforth) and cultural institutions (CIs henceforth) in the UK. While such partnerships are increasingly encouraged in policy and practice, there is limited systematic understanding of how they operate, what impacts they generate, and the conditions that enable or constrain them. The report addresses five research questions relating to partnership characteristics, impact, drivers, barriers, and supporting policy.

Methods

A mixed-methods design was employed.

- **Quantitative analysis** draws on 6,361 impact case studies from the 2021 Research Excellence Framework (REF), identifying 286 cases involving CIs.
- **Qualitative analysis** is based on 40 in-depth interviews with academics and cultural sector representatives.

This approach enables both large-scale mapping of collaboration patterns and in-depth insight into the processes and experiences.

Key findings

1. **Cultural collaborations are distinctive but under-represented**

Collaborations involving CIs represent a relatively small share of REF case studies but form a distinctive subset. They are typically associated with Arts and Humanities disciplines, rely on symbolic and practice-based knowledge, and are often led by smaller but high-performing research units.

2. **Cultural institutions shape impact outcomes**

The presence of CIs (particularly those focused on preserving cultural heritage) strongly increases the likelihood of cultural impact, while being less associated with technological, economic, or global impacts. This highlights both the unique contribution of these partnerships and the limitations of current impact frameworks in capturing their value.

3. **Collaboration is primarily relational and co-creative**

Trust, long-term relationships, and network-building are central drivers. Knowledge exchange is reciprocal and co-produced, supporting mutual learning and capacity building. These dynamics are complemented by strategic motivations (e.g. funding and institutional priorities) and commitments to public value and civic engagement. The findings further

indicate considerable variation in the depth and quality of collaboration, ranging from short-term transactional partnerships to longer-term co-productive relationships characterised by reciprocity, sustained engagement, and institutional learning.

4. **Structural and institutional barriers persist**

The type and breadth of impact is affected by the composition of the collaboration networks involving CIs, with 'mode 1' collaborations (smaller, less interdisciplinary, focused on research and science dissemination) more likely to produce impact with lower geographical and societal reach, and the opposite occurring for "mode 2" collaborations (larger, more interdisciplinary, focused on application).

5. **Structural and institutional barriers persist**

Collaboration is constrained by resource inequalities, misaligned institutional logics, and power asymmetries. Additional challenges include communication gaps, reliance on individual relationships, and short funding cycles, all of which limit sustainability and long-term impact.

6. **Effective collaboration depends on aligned enabling conditions**

Successful partnerships require the alignment of trust-based relationships, equitable funding, clear governance, institutional support, and long-term orientation. Flexible and inclusive practices are essential to sustain collaboration and maximise impact.

Key recommendations

Higher Education Institutions

- Embed collaboration within institutional strategies and structures
- Recognise cultural and societal impact in evaluation and promotion
- Provide equitable resourcing and flexible research processes

Cultural Institutions

- Strengthen organisational readiness and strategic engagement with HEIs
- Build capacity for research collaboration and evaluation
- Engage early in partnership design and advocate for equitable roles

Funding Bodies and Policymakers

- Develop equitable and accessible funding models, including direct support for CIs
- Support long-term partnerships and seed funding initiatives
- Broaden impact frameworks to recognise cultural, social, and relational value

Cross-cutting

- Shift from project-based collaboration towards long-term, trust-based partnerships.

Conclusion

Collaborations between HEIs and CIs make a distinctive contribution to the UK research and innovation ecosystem, particularly in generating cultural and societal value. However, their potential remains constrained by structural inequalities, institutional misalignment, and narrow definitions of impact. Addressing these challenges requires coordinated action across institutions and policy systems to support more equitable, flexible, and sustainable forms of collaboration.

1. Introduction

In the last couple of decades, Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) have been increasingly encouraged not only to play their traditional civic role in society, but also to produce valuable economic, social and cultural impacts (Dawson and Gilmore 2009; Davies and Lyons, 2022). HEIs are now expected to demonstrate impact, for instance, when participating in research and knowledge exchange assessment exercises (Comunian et al., 2014). As a result, academics are motivated to strengthen their collaborations with industry or other stakeholders, to collaboratively produce and publicise knowledge and to try to ensure that they generate impact (Ankrah et al., 2013; Roncancio-Marin et al., 2022). HEIs generally play more embedded roles in the society contributing to societal development (Olsson et al., 2021).

Although in the fields of education and innovation studies there are already numerous studies on HEIs' engagement with external stakeholders, these tend to disproportionately pay attention to partnerships in STEM disciplines (Levy et al., 2009; Segarra-Blasco and Arauzo-Carod, 2008) and to collaborations involving companies in manufacturing, and particularly high-tech sectors (Abreu and Grinevich, 2013; De Wit-de Vries et al.,2019). However, evidence suggests that HEIs actively engage in collaborations with the cultural sector through teaching, research, public engagement as well as by sharing infrastructures (Chatterton and Goddard 2000; Powell 2007; Comunian et al., 2014; Agasisti et al., 2019). CIs are among the most frequent partners of HEIs in the cultural sector (Rossi et al., 2025). CIs are organisations that have an acknowledged mission to engage in the conservation, interpretation and dissemination of cultural, scientific, and environmental knowledge, and promote activities meant to inform and educate citizens on associated aspects of culture, history, science and the environment. Examples of CIs are museums, libraries, historical or botanical societies. Cultural institutions play a pivotal role in the maintenance, conservation, revitalisation, interpretation, and documentation of heritage, and in facilitating citizens' interaction and engagement with heritage. As such, CIs are important actors in the promotion of cultural understanding, intercultural dialogue and cultural diversity, and in the transmission of culture across generations.[1]

[1] source: https://resources.riches-project.eu/glossary/cultural-institutions/

Over time, incentives for HEIs and CIs to collaborate have increased (Moreton, 2016). On the one hand, HEIs need to increasingly demonstrate that they are generating societal impact; on the other hand, CIs are encouraged to seek partnerships to increase their visibility, broaden their network and compensate for cuts in public funding to the arts and cultural sector (Nijzink et al., 2017; Ashton, 2023). HEI-CI collaborations empower the partners to share resources (Hughes et al., 2011), to increase efficiency (Fisher 2012) and, critically, to obtain and co-produce knowledge and create impacts for wider society (Gilmore and Comunian, 2016; Scullion and Garcia 2005; OECD, 2021), for instance by improving understanding in education and culture.

Until now, there have been very few efforts to study systematically the engagement modes between HEIs and CIs, and the processes through which such collaborations generate impact. These efforts include work by the National Centre for Academic and Cultural Exchange (NCACE) on examples of collaborations between universities and the arts (Sigal, 2021), their survey with arts professionals on collaboration with HEIs (Wilson et al., 2021) and their work on how academic research generate arts and culture related impacts (Rossi et al., 2021)[2]. The evidence and extant academic literature on the impact of collaborations between HEIs and the CIs are, however, mostly anecdotal, building on small scale, descriptive analyses of individual cases (Bakhshi et al. 2008). Academic research is also fragmented, published across a wide array of journals and grey literature sources (blogs, reports, etc.) and undertaken from a variety of disciplinary perspectives (Sigal, 2021). We are lacking a comprehensive understanding of the relationships between HEIs and CIs and of the role of the latter in the UK's broader research ecosystem. Therefore, this project aims to enrich our understanding of collaborations between HEIs and CIs by investigating questions such as the following:

1) What are types and characteristics of partnerships between HEIs and CIs (e.g. museums, libraries, archives, art galleries, theatres, concert halls and opera houses)?
2) What impacts are generated from these collaborations?
3) What factors drive the collaboration between HEIs and CIs?
4) What are the barriers to successful collaborations between HEIs and CIs?

[2] These publications are part of the on-line resources collection produced by NCACE: https://ncace.ac.uk/collection/

5) What are supporting policy required to encourage collaborations?

The overall aim of this study is to develop a comprehensive understanding of the nature, impact, and barriers of collaboration between HEIs and CIs in the UK, as well as the role of CIs within the UK's research ecosystem. The study makes three key contributions:

1) It provides an empirical mapping of HEI–CI collaborations at scale.
2) It offers a processual understanding of the dynamics supporting these collaborations
3) It generates policy-relevant insights into the conditions that enable effective and sustainable partnerships.

In addition to mapping the characteristics and impacts of HEI–CI partnerships, the study also considers the quality and depth of collaboration. This is particularly important given concerns that some partnership activities may become overly performance-oriented or instrumental in response to research impact agendas. The study therefore pays attention not only to the existence of collaboration, but also to the extent to which partnerships involve sustained engagement, reciprocity, co-production, and longer-term organisational or societal change.

2. Literature Review and Background

This section reviews the existing literature on collaborations between HEIs and CIs, with particular attention to the role of Arts and Humanities knowledge exchange, universities as regional and civic anchors, and the opportunities and challenges of cross-sector partnership working. It also identifies key methodological and theoretical approaches within the field and highlights important gaps in current understanding. In doing so, the review provides the conceptual and empirical context for the present study.

2.1 Arts and humanities graduates in the creative economy

Recent scholarship highlights the paradoxical position of Arts and Humanities graduates within the Creative Economy. Although these graduates contribute substantially to the operation and development of the sector, their labour is frequently undervalued, insecure, and characterised by precarious employment conditions. Studies indicate that Arts and Humanities graduates often contribute through non-technological innovation, tacit knowledge exchange, creative problem-solving, and community-engaged practice rather than through conventional outputs such as patents or formal intellectual property (Comunian et al., 2014a; 2014b; 2015; Gilmore & Comunian, 2016; Hughes et al., 2011).

As a consequence, dominant policy frameworks that privilege STEM-led innovation and commercially measurable outputs have tended to marginalise the contribution of Arts and Humanities graduates, creating a disconnect between actual value creation and institutional recognition.

2.2 HEIs as regional anchors and knowledge intermediaries

HEIs are increasingly positioned as regional anchors, knowledge intermediaries, and cultural hubs. Acting as ‘third spaces’, they facilitate interaction between academic, public, private, and civic sectors, particularly within regional creative clusters (Comunian et al., 2014b; Davies & Lyons, 2022; Dawson & Gilmore, 2009). Their role extends beyond teaching and research to include talent development, support for cultural infrastructure, and brokerage across sectors.

However, this expanding remit has not always been matched by coherent policy support or sustainable funding. The expectation that universities simultaneously deliver innovation, economic growth, and community engagement may generate institutional strain and role overload (Gilmore & Comunian, 2016).

2.3 Rethinking Knowledge Exchange (KE) in Arts and Humanities

Within the Arts and Humanities context, Knowledge Exchange (KE) is typically informal, relational, and co-creative. Rather than following linear or transactional models common in science and technology fields, KE in Arts and Humanities often involves negotiation of values, institutional expectations, and power relations (Munro, 2016; Moreton, 2016; 2018; Lee et al., 2018).

Examples include artist residencies, co-produced research, public engagement initiatives, and collaborative programming with museums, libraries, and community organisations. These forms of exchange can generate cultural value, institutional learning, and social innovation. Nevertheless, the growing policy emphasis on measurable impact may risk instrumentalising such activity and reducing its epistemic and civic richness (Hughes et al., 2011).

2.4 Power, policy and the creative economy

Policy narratives surrounding the Creative Economy often emphasise positive outcomes such as regional regeneration, innovation spillovers, and social inclusion. However, they may obscure structural vulnerabilities including insecure labour markets, underinvestment in cultural infrastructure, and uneven access to funding (OECD, 2021; Santoro et al., 2020; Sanderson et al., 2023).

A recurring tension exists between high-level policy ambitions and the everyday realities of cultural practitioners and institutions. Emerging models such as impact investment may offer new opportunities to align financial and social objectives, but they may also reproduce narrow definitions of value unless critically examined (Scullion & García, 2005; Nijzink et al., 2017).

2.5 Collaboration between HEIs and CIs

The literature suggests that such collaborations offer significant opportunities, but are frequently shaped by institutional complexity. Barriers include differing organisational priorities, contrasting timescales, communication challenges, and competing understandings of value (Sedgman, 2019; Hauge et al., 2018; Sigal, 2021).

Existing literature also raises concerns that collaborations driven by impact agendas or funding incentives may remain superficial, transactional, or short-term in nature. In such cases, partnerships risk becoming performative exercises oriented towards demonstrating impact rather than fostering meaningful co-production or institutional transformation. This

highlights the importance of examining not only the existence of collaboration, but also its depth, reciprocity, and long-term effects.

Despite these challenges, partnerships grounded in trust, reciprocity, and shared cultural purpose have demonstrated the capacity to generate both technological and cultural innovation (Li & Ghirardi, 2019; Zukauskaite, 2012; Dovey et al., 2016). HEIs may act as initiators, facilitators, convenors, and coordinators within these ecosystems (Villeneuve et al., 2006; Ashley et al., 2023; Amitrano & Bifulco, 2024).

Collaborations involving museums, libraries, galleries, archives, and performing arts organisations often depend upon relational governance models, long-term commitment, and mutual understanding (Yarrow et al., 2008; Eckel & Hartley, 2008).

2.6 Cross-cutting themes in the literature

Three recurring themes emerge across the reviewed literature:

1. **Interdisciplinarity and sectoral convergence** - Boundaries between higher education, industry, public policy, and cultural practice are becoming increasingly porous, requiring flexible and hybrid models of collaboration.
2. **Equity and inclusion** - Several studies call for more inclusive approaches to participation, representation, and access within KE systems, although this remains unevenly developed (OECD, 2021; Moreton, 2018).
3. **Intrinsic versus instrumental value -** Ongoing debate concerns whether creativity should be understood primarily as a driver of economic growth or recognised as a cultural right and public good in its own right.

2.7 Methodological and theoretical approaches

Diverse methodologies have been employed in the existing studies, such as qualitative case studies, stakeholder interviews, social network analysis, participatory action research, and systematic reviews (Ashley et al., 2023; Hauge et al., 2018; Dovey et al., 2016; Schnugg & Song, 2020; Dameri & Demartini, 2020; Sigal, 2021).

Likewise, various theoretical approaches include resource dependency theory, institutional theory, process economics, and critical cultural policy perspectives (Keeney, 2018; Chong, 2013). This diversity reflects the complexity of understanding collaboration across multiple institutional settings.

2.8 Gaps and limitations in the existing literature

Despite growing interest in HEI–CI collaboration, several limitations remain.

1. **Geographical concentration -** Much of the literature is based on the UK and selected European contexts, limiting transferability to other national settings with different policy regimes and institutional structures.
2. **Limited quantitative evaluation -** While critiques of traditional performance metrics are well developed, there remains limited robust quantitative evidence demonstrating the economic, social, and civic outcomes of collaborations.
3. **Lack of longitudinal research -** Many studies focus on projects or pilot initiatives. There is insufficient longitudinal evidence examining sustainability, institutional transformation, or lasting community impact.
4. **Under-Theorisation of power and inequality -** Although asymmetries in resources and influence are acknowledged, issues of race, class, gender, disability, and leadership remain insufficiently explored.
5. **Narrow institutional focus -** Research often privileges large research-intensive HEIs and established CIs, overlooking smaller HEIs, further education colleges, freelance creative networks, and grassroots organisations.
6. **Conceptual fragmentation -** The field remains conceptually fragmented, with inconsistent definitions of key terms such as “value”, “impact”, and “innovation”. Greater interdisciplinary synthesis is required across higher education studies, cultural policy, and innovation research.

Overall, the literature suggests that HEI–CI collaboration is increasingly recognised as relational, co-creative, and socially embedded. However, tensions remain between policy-driven demands for measurable impact and the longer-term, processual, and often intangible forms of value generated through cultural collaboration.

2.9 Implications for the present study

The literature indicates that collaboration between HEIs and CIs is shaped by a series of tensions: between intrinsic and instrumental value, policy ambition and institutional capacity, and relational practice and performance measurement. These tensions highlight important gaps in understanding, particularly regarding how collaborations are initiated, sustained, and experienced by actors across both sectors.

While collaboration is increasingly promoted within policy and institutional discourse, the literature suggests that it continues to be influenced by structural imbalances. In particular, dominant innovation and impact frameworks tend to privilege STEM-oriented models, often

marginalising the relational and cultural forms of value associated with Arts and Humanities practice.

Overall, the field remains somewhat fragmented, but there is a growing convergence around the recognition of collaboration as a relational and co-creative process. However, this remains constrained by policy frameworks that prioritise measurable and economically oriented outcomes.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a mixed-methods research design, reflecting the dual exploratory and descriptive nature of the research questions. A mixed-methods approach is particularly appropriate as it enables the integration of both quantitative and qualitative data, thereby providing a more comprehensive understanding of collaborations between HEIs and CIs. Quantitative data were derived from the 2021 Research Excellence Framework (REF) impact case studies database (https://results2021.ref.ac.uk/impact), while qualitative data were collected through in-depth interviews with representatives from HEIs and cultural organisations. The combination of methods enhances the validity of the findings and allows for both breadth and depth of analysis. The research was structured in two stages: a quantitative phase followed by a qualitative phase.

3.1 Quantitative Stage

3.1.1 Overview and Data Source

The quantitative stage aimed to identify the types, characteristics, and impacts of collaborations between HEIs and CIs. Data were drawn from the publicly available REF 2021 Impact Case Studies database, which provides a comprehensive record of research impact across UK HEIs.

To identify relevant cases, a set of keywords relating to CIs—such as museums, libraries, archives, art galleries, theatres, concert halls, opera houses, music festivals, poetry, and fiction—was applied. This enabled the extraction of a subset of case studies involving collaborations between HEIs and cultural organisations. These cases were compiled into a structured dataset for systematic analysis.

3.1.2 Dataset Construction

The final dataset comprises 6,361 observations, with each observation corresponding to a single REF impact case study. For each case, the dataset includes detailed information at three levels:

1. Unit of Assessment (UoA):

- Name of UoA
- Number of cases submitted
- REF performance scores (Outputs, Environment, Impact, Overall)
- Full-time equivalent (FTE) staff and number of staff submitted

2. Institutional (University) Level:

- Name of university
- Geographic region
- Knowledge Exchange Framework (KEF) cluster

3. Case Study Level:

- Submission panel and case title
- Whether the case was a continuation from REF 2014
- Whether it was jointly submitted with another UoA
- List of formal partners, categorised as:
    - Universities/public research organisations
    - Government bodies (central and local)
    - Companies
    - Hospitals/medical centres
    - Other public sector organisations
    - Associations and charities
    - Cultural institutions

For cultural institution partners, a further classification was applied:

- Museums, galleries, collections
- Theatres, cinemas, opera houses, concert halls, venues
- Libraries and archives
- Historic buildings (e.g., cathedrals, castles, heritage sites)
- Other (e.g., botanic gardens, natural parks, zoos, observatories)

Additional variables include:

- External funders and funding programmes
- Types of research outputs referenced (e.g., publications, performances, software, datasets)
- Reported impact characteristics, including:
    - Number of countries impacted
    - Whether the impact is global
    - Type of impact (cultural, economic, societal, environmental, political, legal, health-related, technological)

3.1.3 Analytical Approach

The analysis focused on identifying systemic patterns in HEI–CI collaborations, including:

- the number and types of CIs involved;
- the characteristics of participating universities;
- the size and structure of partnerships; and
- the networks within which collaborations are embedded.

In addition to quantitative mapping, qualitative content within the case studies was analysed to better understand the processes through which collaborations generate impact.

This stage addressed the following research questions:

1. What are the types and characteristics of partnerships between HEIs and CIs?
2. What impacts are generated from these collaborations?

Out of the 6,361 impact case studies, 286 cases (4.5%) involved at least one cultural institution as a formal partner. However, as 3,343 cases did not report any formal partners, the proportion rises to 9.5% when considering only the 3,018 cases that included formal partnerships.

A total of 409 distinct CIs were identified across the dataset. These were distributed across the following categories:

- Cultural heritage CIs:
    - Museums, galleries, and collections: 236 institutions
    - Libraries and archives: 77
    - Historic buildings (e.g., cathedrals, castles, heritage sites): 28
- Performing arts CIs:
    - Theatres, cinemas, opera houses, concert halls, and performance venues: 51
- Natural sciences CIs:
    - botanic gardens, natural parks, zoos, observatories): 17

Figure 1: The distribution of cultural institution involvement across REF 2021 impact case studies

Collaboration patterns indicate that:

- The maximum number of CIs involved in a single case was 13
- The average number of CIs per case (where at least one was present) was 2.02 (SD = 1.78)
- Most cases (157) involved a single CI
- 69 cases involved two CIs
- 22 cases involved three CIs
- 38 cases involved more than three CIs

In terms of repeated engagement:

- 64 CIs participated in more than one case
- 24 institutions were involved in more than three cases

The empirical strategy proceeded in two stages. First, the characteristics of case studies involving CIs were compared with those that did not include such partners, focusing on the subset of cases with at least one formal partner. This enabled identification of distinguishing features in terms of institutional participation, partnership structures, and impact profiles. Second, the analysis sought to identify different forms of collaboration involving CIs, contributing to a more nuanced understanding of their roles within the broader research and innovation ecosystem.

3.2 Qualitative Stage

The qualitative stage sought to explore the underlying drivers, experiences, and challenges of these partnerships. This involved conducting in-depth, semi-structured interviews lasting approximately 45–60 minutes.

A total of 40 participants were targeted, including:

- 20 participants from HEIs (academics), and
- 20 participants from CIs.

Table 1: Participants' profile

Participant	Category	Cultural institute Sector	Role	Institution type	Region
1	HEI		Professor	Research-intensive	West Midlands
2	HEI		Professor	Research-intensive	Scotland
3	CI	Artist		Independent	Scotland
4	CI	Museum	Curator	Regional	Scotland
5	HEI		Professor	Research-intensive	North West
6	HEI		Professor	Research-intensive	Scotland
7	HEI		Associate Professor	Russell Group	Yorkshire
8	HEI		Professor	Post-92 institution	South West
9	HEI		Professor	Post-92 institution	London
10	CI	Arts & Culture	Associate Director	Regional	South West
11	HEI		Professor	Specialist HEIs	London

12	CI	Museum	Chief Executive Officer	National	Yorkshire
13	HEI		Associate Professor	Post-92 institution	North East
14	CI	Gallery	Manager	Regional	Scotland
15	CI	Museum	Chief Executive Officer	Regional	Scotland
16	CI	Museum	Manager	Regional	South West
17	CI	Artist		Independent	Scotland
18	CI	Theatre	Director	Regional	London
19	CI	Museum	Director	National	London
20	CI	Museum	Director	Regional	Scotland
21	HEI		Associate Professor	Russell Group	North West
22	HEI		Professor	Post-92 institution	West Midlands
23	HEI		Professor	Post-92 institution	South East
24	CI	Gallery	Manager	Regional	North West
25	CI	Museum	Manager	Regional	South East
26	HEI		Professor	Russell Group	London
27	HEI		Professor	Russell Group	Scotland
28	HEI		Professor	Research-intensive	East Midlands

29	CI	Film & Archive	Director	National	London
30	HEI		Professor	Post-92 institution	London
31	HEI		Professor	Russell Group	West Midlands
32	CI	Arts & Culture	Producer	National	London
33	HEI		Professor	Russell Group	South East
34	CI	Archive	Officer	Regional	North East
35	HEI		Professor	Post-92 institution	Scotland
36	HEI		Professor	Post-92 institution	South East
37	CI	Gallery	Director	Regional	East Midlands
38	CI	Museum	Director	Regional	Yorkshire
39	CI	Arts & Culture	Deputy Director	Regional	East of England
40	CI	Artist		Independent	East Midlands

Participants were initially identified based on cases highlighted in the quantitative stage, particularly focusing on academics involved in impact cases with a high number of cultural institution partners. This approach was complemented by snowball sampling and referral methods to broaden participation and capture a diverse range of perspectives. Following interviews with HEI participants, they were asked to recommend relevant contacts within their partner CIs.

All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. The interviews focused on participants' experiences of collaboration, including motivations, enabling factors, barriers, opportunities, and perceptions of policy support. The qualitative analysis primarily addressed the following research questions:

3. What factors drive collaboration between HEIs and CIs?
4. What barriers affect the success of these collaborations?
5. What are supporting policy required to encourage collaborations?

Particular attention was paid to understanding the depth and quality of collaboration, including the extent of co-production, reciprocity, sustained engagement, and perceived organisational or societal change arising from partnerships.

Ethical approval was obtained from the authors' institutional ethics committee prior to data collection. All participants received detailed information about the study, were informed of their right to withdraw at any time, and provided informed consent before participation.

3.2.1 Data collection

A semi-structured interview design was employed using a guided narrative approach. Guided narrative interviewing combines narrative inquiry with interviewer guidance, allowing participants to recount their experiences in story form while remaining oriented to specific research themes. The interview schedule covered three broad areas: (i) the driving factors of the co-creation project, (ii) the role in co-creation process, (iii) the barriers and challenges and (iv) the supporting policy to encourage collaboration. These domains were designed to elicit narratives of collaboration process. Within this structure, participants were encouraged to narrate their collaboration journeys, reflect on key decisions, and explain how institutional contexts shaped their experiences. Probing questions were used to elicit reflection on motivations, constraints, and negotiation strategies during the collaboration. The guided narrative method was chosen over more structured interview approaches to avoid fragmenting participants' accounts into isolated responses and to capture the dynamic and processual nature of collaboration. In parallel, it offered greater analytical consistency, supporting comparability across cases while generating rich, experience-centred data.

3.2.2 Data analysis

Data analysis was conducted using NVivo and combined an inductive template analysis with a narrative analytic lens, allowing for both cross-case pattern identification and attention to the processual and meaning-making aspects of collaboration experience. An initial inductive thematic analysis was undertaken through line-by-line coding of all

interview transcripts to capture emergent meanings and develop an in-depth understanding of the empirical context.

Following analysis of the first 20 interviews, recurring themes raised by both academics and CIs were grouped into preliminary analytical dimensions based around the outlined research questions. including *motivations, barriers, role in collaboration, and enabling conditions for encouraging collaboration*. These inductively derived dimensions formed an evolving analytical template. Within each dimension, data were organised into first-order categories, refined into second-order themes, and synthesised into aggregated dimensions. Subsequent interviews were analysed using this evolving template, allowing for both elaboration of existing themes and the incorporation of new insights.

Following the iterative coding process, the analytical template stabilised around three aggregated dimensions that structured the findings: (1) motivation and driving factors for collaboration, (2) barriers and challenges, and (3) supporting policy required to encourage collaboration.

Together, the two stages provide a robust and integrated methodological framework, combining large-scale evidence of impact with in-depth insights into the processes and dynamics of collaboration.

3.3 Limitations

This study provides a comprehensive analysis of collaboration between HEIs and CIs through a mixed-methods approach. However, several limitations should be acknowledged.

3.3.1 Reliance on REF impact case studies

The quantitative analysis is based on the 2021 Research Excellence Framework (REF) impact case studies, which represent reported and curated accounts of impact rather than direct measures of impact outcomes. These case studies are selectively submitted by HEIs and are often written to meet assessment criteria, which may lead to positive bias, strategic framing, and uneven representation of collaborative activities. As such, they may not fully capture unsuccessful, informal, or less visible forms of collaboration.

3.3.2 Geographical scope

The study focuses exclusively on the UK context, reflecting the use of REF data and UK-based interview participants. While this enables detailed analysis within a well-defined policy and institutional environment, it limits the generalisability of findings to other national

contexts, where funding structures, cultural policies, and higher education systems may differ significantly.

3.3.3 Interview sampling and potential bias

The qualitative sample comprises 40 participants recruited through case-based selection and snowball sampling. While this approach enabled access to relevant and experienced participants, it may introduce network bias, potentially over-representing individuals who are already engaged in or positively disposed towards collaboration. As a result, perspectives from less-engaged or more critical stakeholders may be underrepresented.

3.3.4 Cross-sectional design

The study provides a snapshot of collaboration at a particular point in time and does not capture the longitudinal development of partnerships, including how collaborations evolve, succeed, transform, or dissolve over extended periods. While the study sheds light on participants' perceptions of collaboration depth and quality, assessing longer-term institutional, cultural, or societal change would require longitudinal investigation beyond the scope of the present research.

3.3.5 Measurement of impact and value

The study highlights challenges in capturing the full range of impacts generated through HEI–CI collaboration, particularly cultural, relational, and process-based outcomes. While qualitative insights help address this gap, there remains a lack of robust, standardised metrics for evaluating these forms of value, which constrains comparative analysis.

Despite these limitations, the combination of large-scale quantitative data and in-depth qualitative insights provides a robust and nuanced understanding of HEI–CI collaboration. The findings should therefore be interpreted as indicative of broader patterns and dynamics, while recognising the contextual and methodological constraints outlined above.

4. Findings

This section presents the findings from the quantitative and qualitative stages. It is structured around partnership characteristics, impact, drivers for collaboration, barriers, and supporting policy required for encouraging collaborations.

4.1 Types and characteristics of partnerships between HEIs and CIs

Drawing on the impact case studies involving at least one formal partner, we compare those that include CIs among their partners (286 cases) with those that do not (2,732 cases). The analysis examines four dimensions: collaboration composition, partner knowledge bases, characteristics of the submitting Unit of Assessment (UoA), and the type of impact achieved (see Appendix A).

First, collaborations involving CIs are, on average, larger and more diverse than those without CIs. They include lower shares of universities/public research organisations, central government bodies, companies, hospitals/medical centres, and charities, and—naturally—a higher share of CIs. These collaborations are also more likely to receive external funding, suggesting that CIs' involvement broadens partnership configurations and funding pathways.

Second, to compare knowledge inputs, we analyse the references cited in impact case studies submissions and the disciplinary orientation of the submitting institution. Cultural institutions involving collaborations cite more references overall but a smaller proportion of academic publications (articles, books, chapters, reports, proceedings). They rely more heavily on non-traditional outputs such as grants, patents, software, databases, performances, recordings, and lectures. Using a three-part classification—analytical (publications, literature, lectures), synthetic (patents, software, technology), and symbolic knowledge (performances, artistic outputs, music, archives)—we find that CIs-involving cases draw more extensively on symbolic knowledge and less on analytical knowledge. Consistent with this, CIs-related impact case studies are more commonly submitted by universities in the ARTS KEF cluster and by UoAs in REF Panel D (especially arts and humanities subpanels). They are less likely to involve STEM-focused universities or UoAs in Panels A–C (health, social sciences, engineering, sciences). Other KEF clusters show no significant differences, indicating that the main variation arises from strong arts specialisation and lower STEM representation.

Third, CIs-involving collaborations are more commonly associated with smaller UoAs—those with fewer FTE researchers and fewer impact case studies submissions. Despite this smaller scale, these UoAs demonstrate strong research performance in REF 2021. CIs-involving cases are linked to UoAs with higher proportions of 4* and 2* outputs and fewer 3* outputs, as well as stronger research environments (more 4*, fewer 2* and 1* ratings). Impact quality ratings, however, do not differ between CIs and non- CIs groups. This suggests that CIs' collaborations often stem from smaller units producing high-quality research and operating within strong institutional environments.

CIs-involving collaborations are significantly more likely to report cultural impact as their main impact type and significantly less likely to report other forms of impact, including global impact. None of the CIs-involving impact case studies report economic, legal, or political impact as their primary outcome.

Finally, among the 286 CIs-involving impact case studies, collaborations with "other" CIs—mainly natural-science institutions (zoos, observatories, botanical gardens, natural parks)—are the largest and most diverse. They feature a higher share of universities/public research organisations and associations, fewer CIs, and more external funders, indicating broad cross-sector engagement rather than intra-CIs collaboration. Collaborations involving theatres, cinemas, opera houses, and performance venues involve fewer universities and more companies and hospitals. Collaborations with museums, galleries, and collections include the highest share of CIs, reflecting strong cultural institutions-to-CIs collaboration.

In terms of impact, museums, galleries, and collections—and especially natural-science CIs—show greater likelihood of environmental and technological impacts. Natural-science CIs are less likely to generate cultural impact but more likely to report global impact. Museums also show strong cultural impact profiles.

4.2 The impacts generated from the collaborations

We analyse whether the involvement of CIs influences the type of impact generated by research. First, using the 2,622 case studies involving formal partners, we assess whether the presence of CIs affects the probability of achieving different impact types. Second, focusing on the 286 CS that include CIs as partners, we examine how specific features of CIs' collaborations shape impact outcomes. To address low frequencies in several categories, we aggregate legal and political impacts with societal impact into

Sociopolitical_impact, and combine environmental and health impacts into *Health–environmental_impact*. Economic impact is excluded because no CI-involving cases report it as their primary impact.

We estimate a series of Heckman Probit models predicting the likelihood of each impact type (cultural, health–environmental, sociopolitical, technological). Explanatory variables include: presence of CIs, number and diversity of formal partners, UoA research quality, UoA size, geographical location, REF subpanel, whether the cultural institution is a continuation of a previous one, and the number of funders. The selection equation models the probability of having formal partners and includes the same independent variables. Results are reported in Table 2, with the selection equation in the rightmost column.

The presence of CIs has a strong positive effect on the likelihood of generating cultural impact and a negative effect on all other types of impact, including global impact. Cultural impact is also positively influenced by partnership diversity and research quality, and negatively influenced by UoA size, team size (number of ORCID identifiers), and the number of funders. Partnership diversity increases sociopolitical impact but reduces technological impact.

UoA size negatively affects sociopolitical impact but positively affects health–environmental and technological impacts, suggesting that larger UoAs may be better equipped to produce these more resource-intensive forms of impact.

We also tested whether the combined presence of CIs with specific partner types (e.g., universities, companies, government agencies, hospitals) influences impact via interaction terms, but no significant effects emerged.

Table 2: Heckmann probit regressions on different types of impact (presence of CIs)

VARIABLES	Cultural_impact	Health_environment_impact	Sociopolitical_impact	Technological_impact	Global_impact	N_countries	Formal_partners_D
Share of cultural institutions	2.456***	-2.296***	-1.304***	-11.283**	-1.856**	-1.280	
	(0.340)	(0.856)	(0.212)	(4.423)	(0.810)	(1.121)	
Number of formal partners	-0.002	0.004	-0.002	0.001	0.007**	0.155***	
	(0.004)	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.017)	
Concentration of formal partners	-0.750***	-0.198*	-0.200**	0.761***	0.252**	0.415	
	(0.200)	(0.116)	(0.102)	(0.135)	(0.125)	(0.616)	
Share of staff submitted to REF	0.003	0.001	-0.001	-0.002	-0.000	-0.008	-0.003***
	(0.002)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.002)	(0.001)	(0.005)	(0.001)
Number of FTE staff in UOA	-0.004**	0.003***	-0.004***	0.001*	0.000	-0.000	-0.001***
	(0.002)	(0.000)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.000)	(0.002)	(0.000)
Number of funders	-0.008	0.007	-0.069***	0.049**	0.055***	0.337***	0.150***
	(0.057)	(0.023)	(0.018)	(0.023)	(0.013)	(0.072)	(0.009)
Number of researchers	-0.750***	0.004	-0.002	0.001	0.007**	0.155***	-0.001***
	(0.200)	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.017)	(0.000)
Case continued from 2014	-0.423	-0.198*	-0.200**	0.761***	0.252**	0.415	0.150***
	(0.307)	(0.116)	(0.102)	(0.135)	(0.125)	(0.616)	(0.009)

Regions	Not significant	Not significant	Not significant	Not significant	Significant	Significant	Significant
Research fields	Significant	Significant	Significant	Significant	Significant	Significant	Significant
athrho	-0.231	-0.323	-0.361	0.319	0.722*	-0.055	
	(0.813)	(0.301)	(0.241)	(0.404)	(0.420)	(0.070)	
lnSigma						2.122***	
						(0.013)	
Constant	0.584	-1.981***	0.627**	-2.056***	-3.177***	2.510**	-0.546***
	(0.835)	(0.530)	(0.265)	(0.353)	(0.287)	(1.151)	(0.093)
Observations	2,998	2,998	2,998	2,998	2,998	2,998	6,209

Standard errors in parentheses. *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Additionally, we examined the effects of different CIs types by including CIs category dummies (see Appendix B). These results reveal substantial variation across cultural institution types. Cultural impact is driven primarily by cultural heritage CIs - museums, galleries, collections, libraries, theatres, archives, and historic buildings. Museums, galleries, and collections show negative associations with health–environmental, sociopolitical, and technological impacts, while libraries and archives show negative associations with sociopolitical impact.

“Other” CIs —primarily natural-science institutions such as zoos, observatories, and botanical gardens—have the opposite pattern: they are positively associated with health–environmental impact and negatively associated with sociopolitical and technological impacts. This reflects their scientific orientation and global public-engagement missions.

Overall, the Probit analysis shows that CIs’ involvement substantially shapes impact profiles, reinforcing cultural outcomes while reducing the likelihood of broader technological, sociopolitical, or global impacts. Different cultural institution types contribute distinctively to these patterns, revealing heterogeneity in how CIs participate in and influence research impact generation.

Summing up, the involvement of CIs is positively associated with having cultural impact as the main impact, and negatively associated with the other types of impact (health and environmental, sociopolitical, technological) and with having global impact. The cultural impact achieved thanks to the involvement of CIs is driven by museums, galleries, collections, libraries, theatres, archives and historical buildings. There is however a subset of CIs more focused on the natural sciences that are associated with increased probability of achieving impact on health and the environment.

At the same time, our findings show that the organisation of the collaboration between HEI and CIs matters. We analysed what are the features of the knowledge production processes involving CIs, and whether they affect the nature and breadth of impact obtained.

We clustered the 286 cases that involve CIs, according to the size and composition of the formal collaborations that underpin such cases. In particular, we performed a Wards Linkage clustering using Canberra distance, using the following variables:

- The number of partners
- The shares of partners that are universities, government agencies (national and local), businesses, medical organisations, other public sector organisations, associations, other charities, cultural institutions

- The similarity of partner types (Herfindahl concentration index)

We find that the optimal number of clusters is two (based on the Calinski-Haraback and Duda indices). Cluster 2 (205 cases) includes on average more partners, has more diverse partners and it includes greater shares of the various types of partners than Cluster 1 (81 cases). Collaborations in Cluster 2 tend to rely more on external funding and to have more external funders. With respect to knowledge bases, Cluster 1 consists mainly of cases submitted to REF Panel D—particularly arts and humanities units—while Cluster 2 shows a similar but more varied disciplinary pattern, including a notable share of submissions to Panel C and slightly higher representation from science, medicine and health, and technical fields. Cluster 1 cases cite a marginally higher share of publications, involve larger research, and originate from units with slightly lower levels of research excellence (measured by lower proportions of staff submitted to REF and lower shares of 4* outputs, impact case studies, and environment ratings).

Given these characteristics, Cluster 1 cases—which involve fewer disciplines, smaller research teams, more research-excellent units, a stronger reliance on publications, and fewer as well as less diverse external partners (mostly CIs)—correspond more closely to the archetype of Mode 1 knowledge production (Gibbons et al., 1994). These cases align with conventional, discipline-oriented processes. In contrast, Cluster 2 cases draw on more diverse disciplines, depend less on publications, involve larger teams and slightly less research-excellent units, and include more external funders and more diverse partners (CIs alongside other organisations). These traits position Cluster 2 closer to Mode 2 knowledge production, characterised by cross-sectoral collaboration and heterogeneity of knowledge sources.

We expect Mode 1 cases to be associated with cultural impact—aligned with the disciplinary strengths of participating academics—while Mode 2 cases should be associated with other, more distant forms of impact. As shown in Table 3, this expectation is supported: Mode 1 knowledge production is significantly associated with cultural impact, whereas Mode 2 is associated with non-cultural forms of impact.

We expect Mode 2 cases to demonstrate wider reach, including global impact and contributions to broader socioeconomic challenges. Again, Table 3 supports this: Mode 2 cases exhibit broader geographical reach, while Mode 1 cases show more localised impacts. Mode 2 cases include more often keywords relating to Grand Challenges, particularly environment and climate change. Taken together, the cluster analysis confirms

that the two empirical groupings map closely onto Mode 1 and Mode 2 knowledge production and that these modes are systematically associated with different types and scopes of impact.

Table 3. Modes of knowledge production and impact

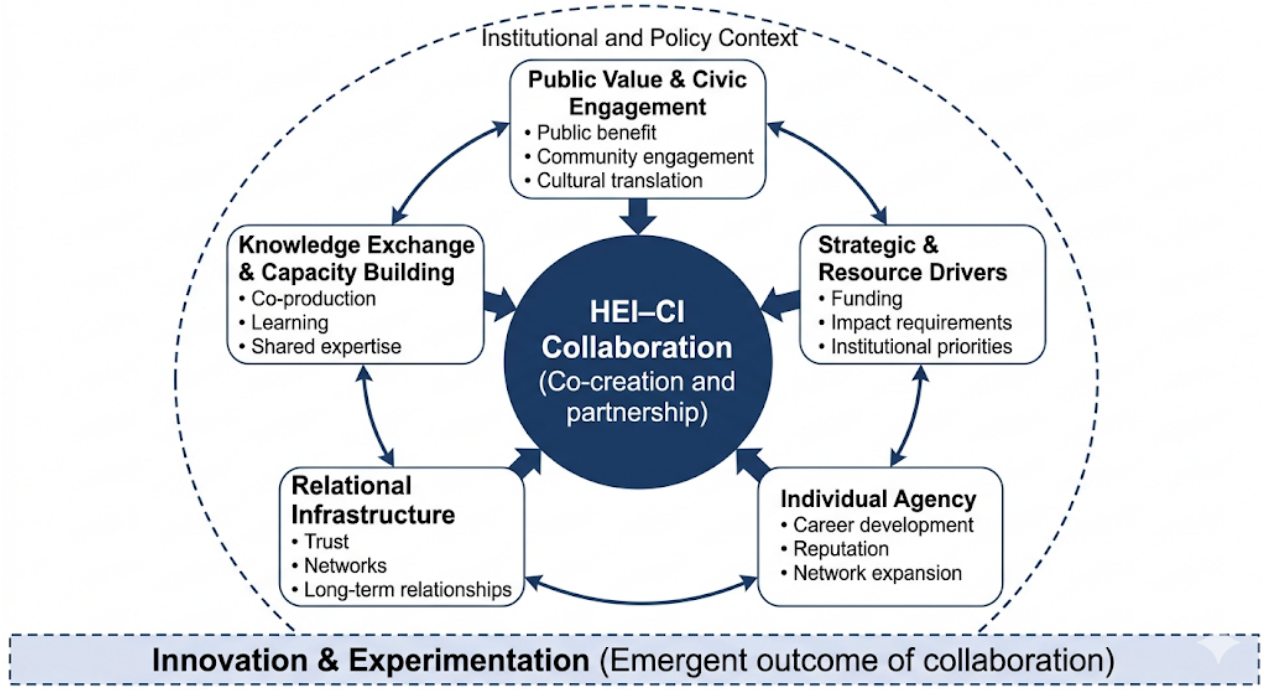
	Cluster 1: Mode 1 knowledge production	Cluster 2: Mode 2 knowledge production	P-value
Areas of knowledge impacted			
Cultural_impact	**0.815**	0.629	***
Economic_impact	0.000	0.000	
Health_environment_impact	0.000	**0.068**	**
Sociopolitical_impact	0.185	**0.283**	*
Technological_impact	0.000	0.020	
Scope of impact			
Presence of Grand Challenges keywords:			
- GC_placemaking	0.543	0.634	
- GC_Health	0.284	0.322	
- GC_Techgood	0.173	0.239	
- GC_Environment	0.321	**0.473**	**
- Number of countries impacted	2.259	**5.010**	*
- Global impact	0.000	**0.039**	*

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

4.3 The driving factors of HEI-CI partnerships

While the quantitative findings identify broad structural patterns in HEI–CI partnerships, the qualitative analysis reveals how these collaborations are experienced, negotiated, and sustained in practice. Analysis of the interview data indicates that collaboration between HEI and CI is shaped by a set of interrelated drivers that extend beyond purely instrumental objectives. These drivers emphasise the importance of relationships, knowledge exchange, public value, and a shared sense of purpose.

Figure 2: Drivers of HEI–CI collaboration



This figure illustrates the key drivers shaping collaboration between HEI and CI. Relational infrastructure and knowledge exchange form the core foundations, while strategic, normative, and individual motivations contribute to the initiation and development of partnerships. Innovation emerges as an outcome of these interactions rather than a primary driver.

4.3.1 Relational infrastructure and network formation

Relational dynamics emerge as the primary driver of collaboration. Partnerships are built through co-creation, co-design, and sustained interaction between academics and cultural practitioners. Collaboration is therefore not simply a project-based activity, but a process of building and maintaining relational ecosystems.

Participants emphasised reaching new audiences and extending networks:

"we're constantly trying to reach audiences that don't engage with us… This can be by collaborating with academics and universities" [R14-CI]

For smaller organisations, collaboration also enhances organisational capacity:

"*for small organisation like us, this benefits us greatly*" [R16-CI]

4.3.2 Knowledge exchange and capacity building

Collaboration functions as a shared learning environment, characterised by bidirectional knowledge exchange. Activities such as research dissemination, student engagement, and professional development enable mutual learning between sectors.

Participants described collaboration as an iterative and exploratory process:

"*it's about exploring together what the issues are… a process of action and experimentation, reflection… which then can lead back into new cycles*" [R7-HEI]

Access to complementary expertise was also seen as critical:

"*having the networks and the ability… to make sure that you've got the specialists and the expertise… is crucial*" [R12-CI]

This suggests that collaboration extends beyond one-way knowledge transfer.

4.3.3 Strategic and resource-driven motivations

Collaboration is also shaped by strategic and resource-related imperatives. Funding opportunities, institutional priorities, and performance requirements play a significant role in initiating partnerships.

For academics, collaboration is closely linked to research impact and funding:

"*they need to do research… have impact… find an audience… [collaboration] was a response to a funding opportunity*" [R2-HEI]

For cultural organisations, partnerships provide access to resources and staffing capacity, highlighting their pragmatic value within resource-constrained environments.

4.3.4 Public value and civic engagement

Public value is a central motivation underpinning collaboration. Partnerships are often driven by a shared commitment to widening access, engaging communities, and translating research into accessible forms.

This was articulated clearly by participants:

"*we are only going to collaborate… if we think there is the potential for public benefit… that is the end goal*" [R19-CI]

Institutional missions were frequently aligned around community engagement:

"*the ambitions of those partnerships are underpinned by that community orientation*" [R9-HEI]

4.3.5 Normative motivations and mission alignment

Beyond strategic drivers, collaboration is supported by shared values and a sense of purpose, including civic responsibility and societal contribution.

"*a sense of personal or civic responsibility… to do something… that contributed to the broader societal recovery*" [R21-HEI]

"*those relationships allow us to deliver large community projects… and engage the public*" [R25-CI]

These motivations extend beyond economic incentives.

4.3.6 Individual agency and career development

Individual motivations also play a significant role. Collaboration supports professional development, network expansion, and identity formation.

"*she helped me… translate my research to public audiences… she brought knowledge I didn't have*" [R23-HEI]

"*it's about developing new partnerships… opening up possibilities*" [R22-HEI]

"*this has really raised the profile… of what we're doing*" [R24-CI]

4.3.7 Innovation and boundary blurring

Collaboration creates opportunities for interdisciplinary experimentation and innovation, particularly at the intersection of art and academia.

"*a space for experimentation… where things can be questioned and explored*" [R7-HEI]

However, innovation tends to emerge as an outcome of collaboration rather than its primary driver.

Overall, the findings suggest that collaboration between HEI and CI is shaped by an interplay of relational, strategic, and normative logics. Network-building and knowledge exchange emerge as central drivers, while funding opportunities, public value, and institutional missions provide important direction and legitimacy for collaborative activity.

At the same time, the evidence indicates considerable variation in the depth, reciprocity, and transformational potential of partnerships. While some collaborations remain relatively transactional and project-based, others evolve into longer-term co-productive relationships characterised by sustained trust, mutual learning, shared ownership, and institutional change.

4.3.8 Depth and quality of collaboration

The findings suggest substantial variation in the depth and quality of collaboration between HEIs and cultural institutions. While some partnerships appeared relatively instrumental or project-specific, others were characterised by long-term engagement, mutual learning, and co-production. Participants frequently distinguished between transactional collaborations centred primarily on funding or institutional requirements and deeper forms of partnership grounded in trust, reciprocity, and shared ownership. Several participants emphasised that meaningful collaboration develops gradually through sustained interaction rather than project activity:

"*Projects… have taken three years to develop before it even gets to filling in the grant application. Because it's all about building the relationships, building trust…*" [R8-HEI]

Depth of collaboration was also associated with mutual influence and organisational learning. Participants described how collaborations changed not only project outcomes but also institutional practices, understandings, and relationships with communities.

"*The impacts are not also just limited to communities that they're impacting on — the ways of institutions, cultural or higher education, [affect] how they operate as well*" [R3-CI]

At the same time, participants acknowledged that some collaborations risk becoming instrumental or performative, particularly when driven primarily by funding requirements or impact agendas:

"*academics will approach us because they want… our letterhead on a bid… it's kind of an instrumentalist way*" [R29-CI]

These findings indicate that collaboration should not be understood simply in terms of the number or type of activities undertaken. Rather, the depth of engagement, degree of reciprocity, and extent of longer-term institutional or societal change are critical dimensions shaping the quality and sustainability of HEI–CI partnerships.

4.4 Barriers to the success of collaborations

The findings indicate that barriers to collaboration between HEI and CI are shaped by a combination of structural constraints, institutional differences, and relational dynamics. These barriers are not only operational but reflect deeper systemic conditions that influence how collaboration is initiated, experienced, and sustained. Concurrently, participants emphasised that such challenges can generate learning and adaptation, highlighting the evolving nature of collaborative practice.

Figure 3: Barriers to the success of HEI–CI collaboration

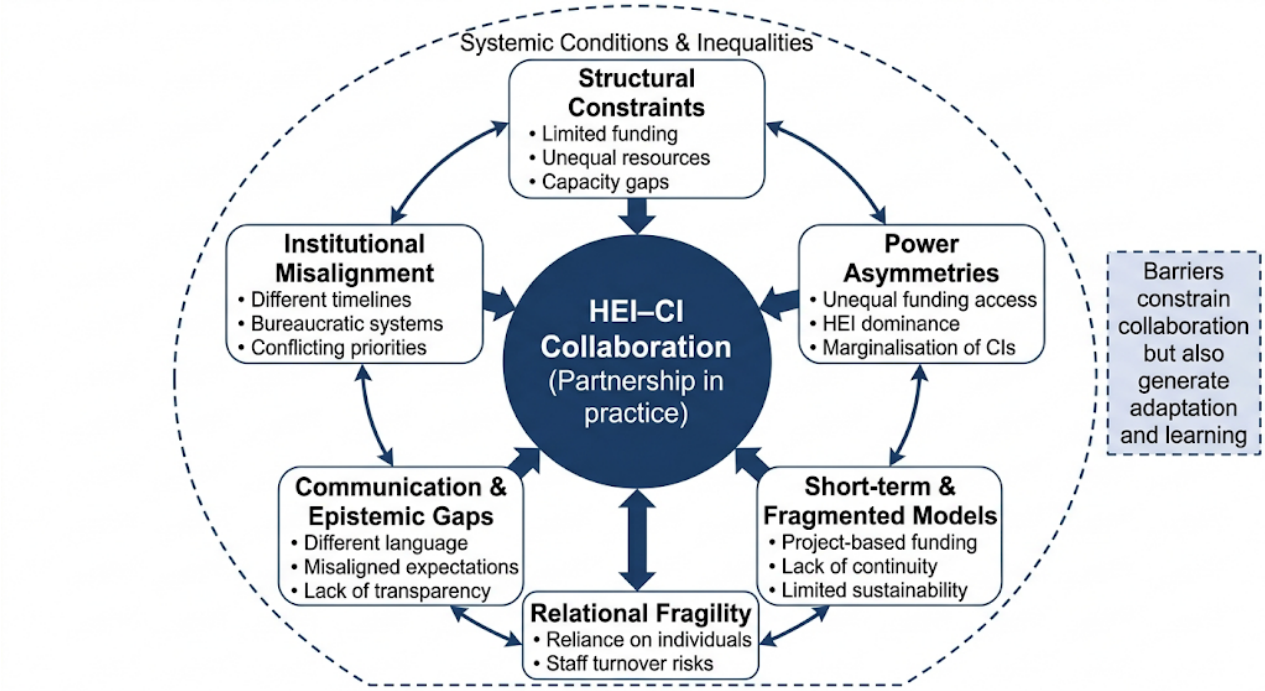


Figure 3 presents the key barriers shaping collaboration between HEI and CI. Structural constraints, institutional misalignment, and power asymmetries form core challenges, while communication gaps, short-term funding cycles, and relational fragility further constrain partnership sustainability. These barriers are embedded within wider systemic inequalities and are not isolated factors but interrelated conditions shaping collaborative practice.

4.4.1 Structural constraints and resource inequality

Structural constraints, particularly funding limitations and unequal resource distribution, represent a primary barrier to collaboration. Cultural institutions often operate with limited

financial capacity, staffing shortages, and high workloads, which restrict their ability to engage fully in collaborative projects.

"*The museum sector and the gallery sector is very short of money… understaffed and overworked… workloads can be absolutely huge and sometimes there's too few of them*" [R23-HEI]

These challenges are compounded by uneven access to research funding, which is often concentrated within universities:

"*A lot of research money stays within the university sector… if we're seeing cultural institutions as important research partners, then their time needs to be covered in the same way*" [R26-HEI]

This imbalance can create dependency and limit the autonomy of cultural partners, particularly smaller organisations.

4.4.2 Institutional logics and operational misalignment

Differences in institutional structures, priorities, and working practices create significant friction in collaboration. HEIs and cultural organisations often operate on different timescales and under different performance pressures.

"*cultural organisation needs to get quicker outcomes… whereas… a three-year project… you may need the three years to get somewhere*" [R22-HEI]

Academic processes are often perceived as rigid compared to the more flexible and responsive nature of cultural work:

"*Universities… are not set up to deliver this kind of research… not community engaged research*" [R26-HEI]

These misalignments can lead to unrealistic expectations and project tensions:

"*we've got to submit the bid by Thursday… I don't even know what I'm supposed to do… it's not going to work*" [R14-CI]

4.4.3 Power asymmetries and marginalisation

Collaboration is further shaped by unequal power relations between HEI and CI. Universities often occupy a dominant position due to their control over funding and institutional resources.

Cultural partners reported experiences of instrumental engagement:

"*academics will approach us because they want… our letterhead on a bid… it's kind of an instrumentalist way*" [R29-CI]

Access barriers disproportionately affect smaller organisations:

"*asking for match funding… very often rules us out… there is a huge difference between the larger national institutions and smaller regional museums*" [R25-CI]

Participants also highlighted a broader lack of recognition of cultural value:

"*failure to understand quite how fundamental… this kind of activity is*" [R27-HEI].

This reinforces existing hierarchies, reflecting a system that is not neutral but structurally shaped by unequal access to resources, recognition, and decision-making power.

4.4.4 Communication gaps and epistemic misalignment

Differences in language, professional norms, and expectations can lead to misunderstandings and hinder effective collaboration.

"*It's a language that… is much less familiar… it might be quite strange to them*" [R22-HEI]

A lack of transparency further exacerbates these issues:

"*the barriers are normally in the mistake of not being transparent about… what's possible*" [R13-HEI]

While these differences can create challenges, participants also noted that they can enrich collaboration by introducing diverse perspectives.

4.4.5 Relational fragility and dependence on individuals

Many collaborations rely heavily on individual relationships rather than institutional structures, making them vulnerable to disruption.

"*they're often really driven by individuals… that can be very challenging when those individuals leave*" [R9-HEI]

"*the person who instigated it… has left… and that can be quite challenging*" [R19-CI]

This highlights the need for stronger institutional embedding of partnerships:

"*we're on a journey together… discovering it together*" [R24-CI]

4.4.6 Short term and fragmented collaboration models

Collaborations are often shaped by short-term funding cycles, leading to fragmented and unsustained partnerships.

"*we do short-term projects and then… jump to the next thing… actually, a bit of longevity… great things come out of that*" [R24-CI]

The lack of long-term planning limits cumulative impact:

"*impacts are longer burn… they don't happen immediately*" [R22-HEI]

Participants also emphasised the need for gradual relationship-building:

"*you can't just whack a collaboration together… those things can only work… if they're based on prior working*" [R28-HEI]

4.4.7 Tensions around recognition, value, and impact

Challenges also arise in how contributions and impact are recognised across sectors. Differences in expectations around credit, authorship, and evaluation can create tension.

"*a collaboration ideally is… mutually deciding… appropriate credit… whose name's going to come first*" [R30-HEI]

There is also a lack of shared understanding of value:

"*Policymakers are not sufficiently aware of the value that arises across the boundary*" [R28-HEI]

4.4.8 Capacity and engagement gaps

Differences in skills, experience, and capacity further constrain collaboration. Cultural institutions may lack time or expertise to engage fully in research processes:

"*very limited capacity… skills often… they really want to evaluate… but don't have the time*" [R28-HEI]

However, academic practices may be perceived as inaccessible:

"*a very particular kind of vocabulary… could be quite alienating*" [R38-CI]

Limited engagement with communities was also identified as a concern:

"*academics sit in a world away from real people… having the information for communities is really important*" [R24-CI]

4.4.9 Barriers as opportunities for learning

Importantly, participants framed many of these challenges as opportunities for reflection and improvement. Effective collaboration was seen as dependent on transparency, realistic expectations, and iterative learning.

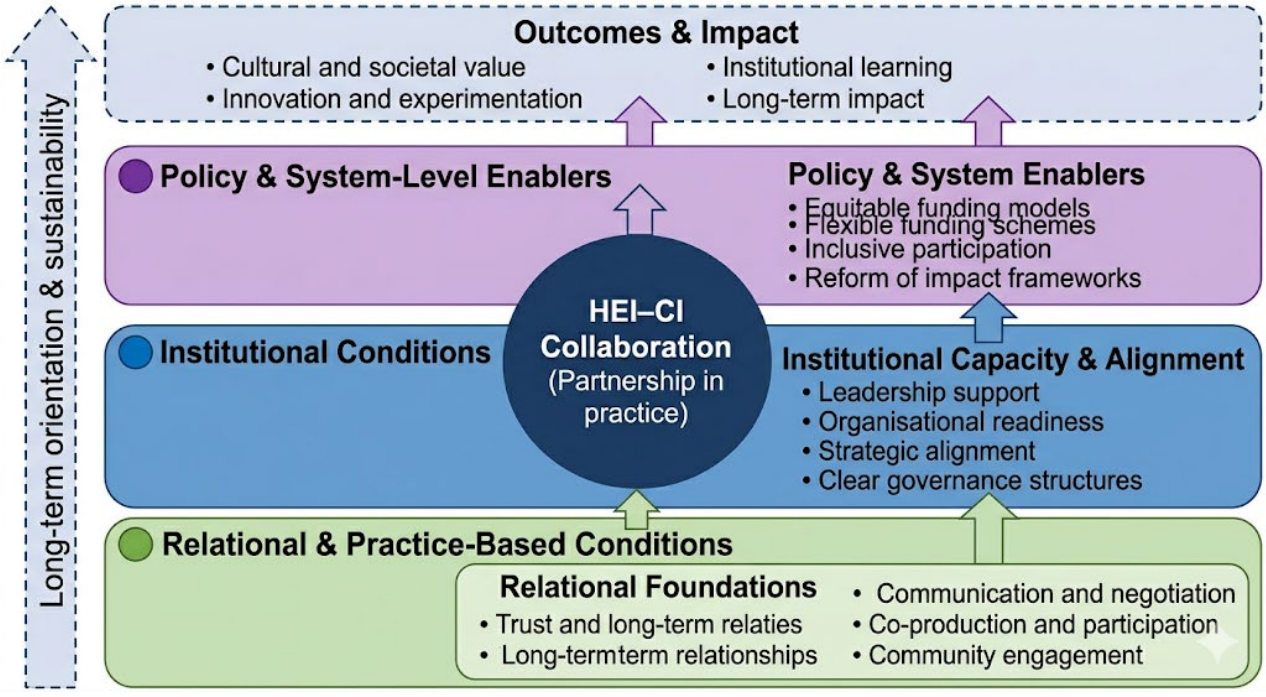
"*knowing when not to do it is super important… the barriers are normally in… not being transparent*" [R13-HEI]
This reflects the adaptive nature of collaboration.

Overall, barriers to HEI–cultural institution collaboration reflect interconnected structural, institutional, and relational dynamics. Resource inequalities, misaligned institutional logics, and power asymmetries shape participation, while communication gaps and short-term funding cycles limit sustainability. At the same time, these challenges underscore learning, adaptation, and relationship-building in fostering more effective and equitable collaborations.

4.5 Supporting policy required to encourage collaborations

The findings identify a set of interrelated enabling conditions that support effective collaboration between HEI and CI. These conditions form a collaborative environment in which relational, structural, and policy supports collectively sustain partnership development and long-term impact. Rather than operating in isolation, these factors reinforce one another, shaping the quality, sustainability, and equity of collaboration.

Figure 4: Enabling conditions for HEI–CI collaboration



This figure presents the multi-level conditions that support effective collaboration between HEI and CI. Relational practices form the foundation, supported by institutional capacity and alignment, and shaped by broader policy and system-level enablers. The alignment of these layers enables sustainable partnerships and the generation of cultural, societal, and innovation-related outcomes

4.5.1 Relational foundations and trust-based collaboration

Strong relational foundations are central to successful collaboration. Participants consistently emphasised trust, long-term relationship-building, and mutual understanding. Collaboration is seen as an evolving process grounded in sustained engagement rather than short-term transactions.

"*long-term relationships [are] probably the most important thing… because it's all about building the relationships, building trust… and making sure it's working to everyone's goals*" [R8-HEI]

"*that's often down to individual relationships and people taking the time to understand us… and build up relationships with us that we trust them*" [R14-CI]

"*We've had a long relationship with our cultural partner and I think that that does make a big difference. So it means that there's a sort of starting point of trust, which feels really important because I think there is sometimes, understandably, a suspicion about getting involved in research because of this slight fear that they are objects of study rather than being partners in the process and co-producers of the research*" [R22-HEI]

These insights demonstrate that trust, reciprocity, and continuity are foundational to effective partnership working.

4.5.2 Equity, inclusion, and power rebalancing

Equitable collaboration requires deliberate efforts to address structural inequalities and ensure inclusive participation. Participants highlighted on funding models that adequately compensate all partners and governance structures that enable shared decision-making.

"*It's very hard for partners who are not equitably reimbursed to justify the time. If research of this nature is not equitably reimbursed, it has a knock-on effect then about the ability of that organisation, the capacity of them to engage fully — and it's not that they don't want to engage, it's just that that limits things*" [R26-HEI]

"*Having those partnerships in place before you even write your application [...] we're depending on it happening the other way around, which is a shame because then we're more of a participating partner [...] rather than somebody that might be leading and delivering exactly what we want*" [R25-CI]

"*The two most successful, true, equitable partnerships I believe we've had with universities have both been cases where we knew there was something that we shared in terms of interests. It is about mutual value and how we reach that together*" [R29-CI]

These findings emphasise the need to recognise CI as equal contributors and to design collaborations that promote fairness and shared ownership.

4.5.3 Funding ecosystems and resource enablement

Accessible, flexible, and equitable funding is a critical enabler of collaboration. Participants emphasised diversified funding streams, including smaller grants, institutional support, and simplified funding mechanisms.

"*whenever we work with universities, the funding goes to them. It doesn't come to us. So we're not in control of it*" [R12-CI]

"it would be nice if it was more accessible with small amounts of money for smaller bids… so they can free up time to be part of a bid" [R5-HEI]

These accounts underscore the need for funding systems that distribute resources more equitably and enable meaningful participation from all partners.

4.5.4 Strategic alignment and governance clarity

Clear alignment of goals, roles, and expectations is essential for effective collaboration. Establishing shared priorities and transparent governance structures at the outset have been outlined.

"*In order for there to be impact, the greatest impact, it has to be something that we wanted to do — it has to be something that we have identified as the problem and that we have identified research as the means to address that problem*" [R29-CI]

"*You have to be extremely open at the beginning of a conversation about the levels of expectations and what is not negotiable and what is what from the partner's point of view. Timekeeping and communication are the absolute essential ones, particularly for a public event like that where the timetable is not going to change. There is a very, very strict timeline in advance that you have to agree at the outset is going to be unchangeable and*

everything conforms to that timetable. So that involves good collaboration and excellent communication and time management skills on everybody's part" [R28-HEI]

"*Being very clear about what the capacity is and what our role is and what it isn't is laid out quite early on so that everybody* is clear about when and how and how much they're going to be involved in the project" [R29-CI]

These practices reduce uncertainty and support coordinated, accountable partnerships.

4.5.5 Communication and negotiation

Effective collaboration depends on strong communication and the ability to negotiate differences in practice, expectations, and institutional norms.

"*When we talk about co-creation [...] it's about negotiating power all the time. It's also about negotiating assumptions about how one does the work we do. It's about negotiating the language we use. It's about negotiating how we organise time, how we organise space. All of those things are constantly in negotiation.It's sort of working out different working practices so that we work towards the same agreed end, but we might need to adjust and adapt our familiar ways of doing things*" [R22-HEI]

"*A level of patience and understanding of what our organisation does. People just sort of have an expectation that there are hundreds of us and we do this all day, you know, a recognition that your ask will be one of the 50 requests that I've had that month. A bit of humility …..really recognising and understanding us as an organisation and what our values are.There's no point you coming with a project that just doesn't speak to any of our priorities or any of our values*" [R29-CI]

These insights indicate relational competence, including empathy, flexibility, and mutual understanding.

4.5.6 Institutional capacity, leadership, and organisational readiness

Institutional support and leadership commitment play a crucial role in enabling collaboration. Dedicated infrastructure and strategic prioritisation of partnerships facilitate sustained engagement.

"*we have a director who is very supportive of research and encourages us to pursue collaborative opportunities when they align with the organisation's priorities"* [R20-CI]

"the centre was set up… specifically to develop partnerships with museums and heritage organisations" [R8-HEI]

These findings suggest that collaboration is more effective when embedded within institutional strategies and supported by appropriate resources.

4.5.7 Long-term partnership and sustainability

Sustainable collaboration requires long-term planning and ongoing investment in relationships. Moving beyond project cycles have been emphasised.

"*Trying to move to a model of thinking around three, 5-10 years, not next year. Partnerships with the university with cultural institutions are most successful on long term planning*" [R9-HEI]

"*Projects, research projects that I'm sort of looking to submit with about six different cultural institutions has taken three years to develop before it even gets to filling in the grant application. Because it's all about building the relationships, building trust, changing it according to what different institutions want, and that it's working to everyone's goals*" [R8-HEI]

"*I want to see a ripple effect and I want to see a culture develop and I want an impact to be a legacy so that conversations continue. If they keep working together and particularly if they go from a small grant from me to a big research grant*" [R10-CI].

4.5.8 Co-production and community participation

Inclusive collaboration practices that involve communities and stakeholders enhance the relevance and impact of partnerships. The evidence reinforces the significance of participatory approaches and public value.

"*We went over setting up impact projects, chatting to people, having community group meetings and finding out what it is they would like to get from the project and then you setting up an impact activity that specifically gives them what they said they wanted, rather than just trying to come up with ideas that you didn't ask them. The beneficiary knows what it is they want*" [R5-HEI].

"*The point of the university is to make change, make positive change in the world for people. And you know, if we're doing that, then we're doing well. The impacts are not also just limited to communities that they're impacting on — the ways of institutions, cultural or higher education, [affect] how they operate as well. The impact has to be felt beyond the institution*" [R3-CI].

4.5.9 Policy and system-level enablers, flexibility, and adaptive practice

Broader policy frameworks and institutional systems shape the conditions for collaboration. Participants emphasised supportive policy environments, as well as flexibility and adaptability in practice.

"*I think success also depends on the ability to pivot and shift and be flexible and adapt. Sometimes you end up in a salvage situation where you're like: this isn't where we wanted to be, but this is where we are — how can we get to the end of this process in a way that everyone walks away feeling OK about what happened? That movement is really important*" [R10-CI].

"*I would welcome policymakers to start from a recognition of systemic inequalities, historic systemic inequality — not start from the misconstrued idea that it's a level playing field so we can all apply. Policymakers have to be much more interventionist into how those consortia are constituted. If we do want to move to a place that's more representative, and therefore diversify the talent in research.They've got to look at engaging with a much wider range of different constituencies that they previously haven't*" [R9-HEI].

These insights highlight the need for policy interventions that address structural inequalities while enabling flexibility and innovation.

Overall, effective collaboration depends on a dynamic ecosystem characterised by trust, equity, adequate resourcing, institutional support, and adaptive practice. These enabling conditions are interdependent and must be aligned to support sustainable, impactful, and equitable partnerships that extend beyond individual projects. Collectively, the findings indicate that HEI–CI collaboration is shaped by the interaction of relational practices, institutional structures, and policy environments. While these partnerships generate distinctive forms of cultural and societal value, they remain constrained by systemic conditions that limit their scale, sustainability, and recognition.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

5.1 Conclusion

Drawing together the findings from both the quantitative and qualitative analysis, this study provides a comprehensive account of the nature, drivers, barriers, and enabling conditions of collaboration between HEI and CI in the UK .

First, the quantitative analysis demonstrates that collaborations involving CI represent a distinct subset of partnerships within the broader research ecosystem. Although relatively limited in number, these collaborations are characterised by diverse partnership structures and a strong orientation towards cultural impact. They draw on symbolic and practice-based knowledge, are often led by arts and humanities disciplines, and are frequently associated with smaller but high-performing research units. The findings reveal that the involvement of CI is strongly associated with cultural forms of impact, while being less likely to generate technological, economic, or global impacts. This shows both the distinctive contribution of cultural partnerships and the limitations of prevailing impact frameworks in capturing their full value.

Second, the qualitative findings show that collaboration is driven by a complex interplay of relational, strategic, and normative factors. Relationships and trust emerge as foundational, with collaboration understood as a process of network-building and sustained engagement rather than a series of discrete projects. Knowledge exchange is central and operates as a reciprocal and co-creative process, enabling mutual learning and capacity building across sectors. In parallel, collaborations are shaped by strategic imperatives, including funding opportunities, institutional priorities, and the need to demonstrate research impact. These drivers are complemented by a strong commitment to public value, civic engagement, and shared institutional missions, as well as by individual motivations related to professional development and identity.

Third, the study identifies a range of persistent barriers that constrain collaboration. These include structural inequalities in funding and resources, misalignments between institutional logics and timescales, and enduring power asymmetries that position universities as dominant actors. Communication challenges, differences in language and practice, and the reliance on individual relationships further complicate collaboration, while short-term funding cycles limit sustainability and long-term impact. Importantly, these

barriers are not isolated issues but reflect deeper systemic dynamics within the higher education and cultural sectors.

Finally, the findings highlight the conditions under which collaboration can be effectively supported and sustained. Successful partnerships depend on the alignment of multiple enabling factors, including trust-based relationships, equitable funding and governance arrangements, clear strategic alignment, and strong communication and negotiation practices. Institutional capacity and leadership support are critical, as is a long-term orientation that allows partnerships to develop over time. Inclusive, co-produced approaches that engage communities enhance relevance and impact, while supportive policy frameworks and adaptive practices are necessary to address structural inequalities and respond to changing conditions.

Overall, HEI–CI collaboration is shaped by interconnected relational and institutional dynamics. While such collaborations make a distinctive and valuable contribution, particularly in generating cultural and societal impact, their potential is currently constrained by systemic challenges. Addressing these challenges requires a shift towards more equitable, flexible, and long-term approaches to partnership working, alongside broader recognition of the diverse forms of value generated through collaboration between higher education and the cultural sector.

The findings further suggest that collaboration quality depends not simply on the number of partnerships, but on the depth of engagement, reciprocity, and longer-term change generated through collaboration. This distinction is important in avoiding overly instrumental or performative approaches to collaboration driven primarily by funding or impact requirements.

These findings also point to structural tensions within the current system. Existing research and impact frameworks remain misaligned with the forms of value generated through Arts and Humanities collaboration, which are often relational, cultural, and process-based. In practice, the system continues to privilege STEM-oriented models of innovation, reinforcing narrow definitions of value. Collaboration is therefore not a neutral process, but one shaped by uneven power relations, resource distribution, and institutional hierarchies. In doing so, the study challenges narrow, performance-oriented understandings of collaboration and highlights the importance of relational and process-based forms of value that are often marginalised within prevailing impact frameworks.

This project has generated a range of outputs and engagement activities, including academic publications, and presentations to academic and practitioner audiences. These activities have supported the dissemination and impact of the research beyond the immediate study context. A full list is provided in Appendices C and D.

5.2 Recommendations

Building on the findings, this section outlines a set of practical, evidence-informed actions for key stakeholders to strengthen and sustain collaboration between HEI and CI. The recommendations reflect the need to align relational, institutional, and policy conditions in order to support more equitable, effective, and long-term partnerships.

Figure 5: Policy roadmap for strengthening HEI-CI collaboraiton

Figure 5 synthesises the key findings of the study and outlines a structured pathway for strengthening collaboration between HEI and CI. It highlights priority actions, enabling conditions, and expected outcomes across the system.

5.2.1 Higher Education Institutions

Higher education institutions play a central role in initiating and sustaining collaborations. To enhance their effectiveness, HEIs should move beyond individual-led initiatives and embed collaboration within institutional structures and practices.

Embedding collaboration institutionally is critical. HEIs should develop formal partnership strategies with CI, supported by dedicated roles or structures such as knowledge exchange hubs or cultural partnership leads. This would reduce reliance on individual academics and ensure continuity and strategic alignment.

Recognising and rewarding diverse forms of impact is equally important. Institutions should broaden their definitions of academic success to include cultural, social, and community impact. Collaborative and co-produced work should be formally recognised within promotion, appraisal, and workload allocation systems.

Providing equitable resourcing and support is necessary to enable meaningful collaboration. HEIs should allocate funding to support the time and contributions of cultural partners, offer administrative and grant development support, and invest in small-scale seed funding to initiate partnerships.

Increasing flexibility in research processes would further facilitate collaboration. This includes adapting timelines and expectations to accommodate non-academic partners and simplifying bureaucratic procedures associated with collaborative and community-engaged research.

Finally, **building institutional capacity for collaboration** is essential. HEIs should invest in training and professional development in areas such as co-production, partnership working, and public engagement, while also encouraging interdisciplinary and cross-sectoral collaboration skills among staff and students.

5.2.2 Cultural Institutions

Cultural institutions are key partners in collaborative research and knowledge exchange, but often face structural and capacity-related challenges. Strengthening organisational readiness and strategic engagement is therefore essential.

Enhancing organisational readiness involves developing internal strategies for engagement with HEIs, identifying priority areas for collaboration aligned with institutional missions, and designating staff responsible for partnership development.

Improving visibility and accessibility can support more effective engagement. Cultural institutions should proactively communicate their expertise, collections, and potential contributions, and actively participate in networks that connect the cultural and academic sectors.

Building internal capacity for research engagement is also important. This includes investing in skills related to research methods, evaluation, and impact assessment, as well as allocating staff time or roles dedicated to collaborative activity where feasible.

Engaging early and strategically in partnerships can help ensure more balanced collaborations. Cultural institutions should seek involvement at the project design stage and clearly articulate their needs, priorities, and expectations.

In addition, **advocating for equitable collaboration** is critical. This includes ensuring clarity around roles, responsibilities, and recognition, and seeking fair compensation and shared ownership of outputs.

5.2.3 Funding bodies and policymakers

Funding bodies and policymakers play a pivotal role in shaping the broader ecosystem within which collaboration occurs. Addressing structural inequalities and enabling more inclusive and sustainable partnerships requires targeted intervention.

Developing more equitable funding models is a priority. Funding mechanisms should ensure that resources are distributed fairly across all partners and that CI receive direct financial support, including compensation for their time and expertise.

Supporting flexible and accessible funding schemes would lower barriers to participation. This includes offering small-scale and seed funding, simplifying application processes—particularly for smaller organisations—and enabling exploratory and practice-based projects.

Encouraging long-term and sustainable partnerships is essential to move beyond fragmented, project-based collaboration. Policymakers should support multi-year funding programmes and provide resources for partnership development prior to full project implementation.

Reforming evaluation and impact frameworks is also necessary. Broader definitions of impact should be adopted to capture cultural, social, and relational value, while recognising co-production, process-based outcomes, and community engagement. This would reduce reliance on narrow economic or technological metrics.

Addressing structural inequalities within the system requires proactive measures. Policymakers should support the inclusion of smaller and under-resourced cultural organisations, encourage diverse partnership models, and intervene where necessary to ensure equitable access to funding opportunities.

Finally, **facilitating cross-sector infrastructure and networks** can strengthen collaboration at scale. Investment in intermediary organisations, knowledge exchange platforms, and regional or national networks can enhance connectivity and support partnership development.

5.2.4 Cross-cutting recommendation

Across all stakeholder groups, there is a need to shift from project-based collaboration towards long-term, trust-based partnership models. This requires coordinated action to align funding structures, institutional practices, and policy frameworks with the relational and co-creative nature of collaboration identified in this study.

5.2.5 Directions for future research

To advance understanding of collaborations between HEI and CI, future work should adopt a multi-level perspective that captures the interplay between institutional contexts, organisational dynamics, and individual actors.

Macro Level: Institutional and Policy Contexts

First, further work is needed to examine how institutional and policy contexts shape collaborations between HEI and CI. While our analysis highlights how different features of collaborations generate different forms of impact, it does not fully account for how these collaborations are influenced by research evaluation systems, funding structures, and national cultural policies. Given the increasing importance of impact assessment frameworks such as the REF, future research should explore how policy environments enable or constrain different modes of collaboration and their associated impacts.

Additionally, cultural partnerships are shown to generate forms of impact that are often diffuse, long-term, and difficult to capture using conventional metrics. These include changes in public understanding, cultural dialogue, and community engagement. Future research should explore alternative approaches to evaluating impact that can better capture these intangible and process-based outcomes and examine how such approaches might be incorporated into existing research evaluation systems.

Meso Level: Organisational and Relational Dynamics

At the meso level, there is a need to better understand the organisational and relational mechanisms that reinforce deeper forms of collaboration. More intensive and co-creative forms of engagement are consistently associated with broader societal impact. However, the processes through which such collaborations are developed and sustained remain underexplored. Research should further investigate the role of trust, shared governance, mutual learning, and boundary-spanning capabilities in enabling collaborations to move from transactional or resource-based interactions towards more integrative and co-creative forms.

Additionally future research should further explore the specific mechanisms through which creative practices, storytelling, and community engagement contribute to addressing complex societal problems.

Micro Level: Individual Actors and Practices

At the micro level, further research is needed to understand the different roles played by individual actors such as academics, curators, artists, and community practitioners in shaping collaboration and impact. These actors often operate as boundary spanners, translating between different knowledge domains and institutional logics. Future studies should explore how individual values, motivations, skills, and professional identities in each of these different professional roles influence the development of collaborative practices.

Methodologically, future research could combine large-scale analyses of impact case studies with in-depth qualitative approaches, such as longitudinal and ethnographic studies of collaborative projects, to capture the relational and processual dynamics through which co-creation generates impact.

5.3 Concluding remark

Taken together, these recommendations aim to support more equitable, sustainable, and impactful collaborations between HEI and CI. By addressing structural barriers, strengthening institutional capacity, and recognising diverse forms of value, stakeholders can better realise the full potential of cross-sector partnerships in contributing to research, culture, and society. Ultimately, strengthening HEI–CI collaboration requires moving beyond transactional models of partnership towards more equitable, relational, and sustained forms of collaboration capable of generating long-term cultural, institutional, and societal change.

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7. Appendices

Appendix A: Specificities of collaborations that involve CIs

	Formal collaboration does not include CIs	Formal collaboration includes CIs	Significance of t-test
N observations (only cases with formal partners)	2,732	286	
Features of the collaboration:			
N formal partners	4.840	9.024	***
Concentration index (Herfindahl)	0.564	0.449	***
Share of formal partners that are:			
- universities or public research organisations	0.367	0.263	***
- central government departments, agencies, authorities etc.	0.191	0.101	***
- city, local or regional government departments, agencies, authorities etc.	0.038	0.042	
- companies	0.225	0.103	***
- hospitals or medical centres	0.050	0.004	***
- other public sector organisations	0.013	0.010	
- associations	0.055	0.047	
- other charities (for example NGOs)	0.061	0.047	
- cultural institutions	0.000	0.382	***
Presence of external funders	0.791	0.811	*
Number of external funders	3.081	2.755	
Knowledge base:			
Total references	4.518	6.080	***
Share of references that are publications	0.522	0.482	
Share of references of other kinds	0.348	0.436	***

Panel A	0.251	0.024	***
Panel B	0.263	0.049	***
Panel C	0.339	0.178	***
Panel D	0.148	0.748	***
Social_sciences	0.213	0.126	***
Medicine_health	0.265	0.014	***
Technical	0.173	0.045	***
Humanities	0.103	0.507	***
Sciences	0.203	0.070	***
Arts	0.043	0.238	***
KEF ARTS cluster	0.003	0.021	***
KEF E cluster	0.293	0.276	
KEF J cluster	0.064	0.091	
KEF M cluster	0.021	0.029	
KEF STEM cluster	0.022	0.000*	*
KEF V cluster	0.329	0.333	
KEF X cluster	0.266	0.251	
Submitting unit:			
N cases submitted per UoA	4.735	3.682	***
FTE researchers of UoA	66.938	41.361	***
Share of researchers submitted per UoA	87.566	90.175	
Overall 4*	37.080	40.843	***
Overall 3*	45.568	40.976	***
Overall 2*	15.245	16.241	
Overall 1*	1.850	1.860	
Outputs 4*	32.707	37.685	

Outputs 3*	48.763	41.299	
Outputs 2*	16.533	19.051	***
Outputs 1*	1.668	1.840	
Impact 4*	45.576	44.355	
Impact 3*	40.100	41.121	
Impact 2*	12.192	11.961	
Impact 1*	1.857	2.476	
Environment 4*	40.240	47.325	***
Environment 3*	42.127	39.921	
Environment 2*	15.086	11.932	**
Environment 1*	2.528	0.822	***
Types of impact:			
Number of countries impacted	4.376	4.231	
Global impact	0.099	0.028	***
Cultural impact	0.072	0.682	***
Economic impact	0.028	0.000	***
Environmental impact	0.090	0.045	***
Health impact	0.152	0.003	***
Legal impact	0.022	0.000**	***
Political impact	0.022	0.000**	***
Societal impact	0.372	0.255	***
Technological impact	0.242	0.014	***

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Appendix B: Heckmann probit regressions on different types of impact (presence of CI disaggregated into types)

VARIABLES	Cultural_impact	Health_environment_impact	Sociopolitical_impact	Technological_impact	Global_impact	N_countries	Formal_partners_D
Museums, galleries, collections	1.225***	-0.522**	-0.611***	-1.743***	-0.451*	0.313	
	(0.123)	(0.240)	(0.116)	(0.522)	(0.231)	(0.692)	
Libraries, archives	0.873***	-5.117	-0.385**	-5.559	-0.428	-1.422	
	(0.172)	(1,099.367)	(0.156)	(790.889)	(0.380)	(0.983)	
Historical building	0.890**	-5.392	-0.387	-5.692	-4.410	-1.224	
	(0.406)	(1,940.423)	(0.308)	(1,581.101)	(1,366.050)	(1.870)	
Theatres, performing arts venues	0.308	-5.272	-0.055	-4.552	-4.260	-1.826	
	(0.240)	(1,360.261)	(0.218)	(1,165.436)	(1,453.968)	(1.449)	
Other CIs (natural sciences focused)	0.689	0.837**	-0.790*	-0.799*	0.109	-1.386	
	(0.469)	(0.355)	(0.422)	(0.429)	(0.376)	(1.963)	
Number of formal partners	-0.014***	0.004	0.001	0.002	0.007**	0.160***	
	(0.005)	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.017)	

Concentration of formal partners	-0.180	-0.209*	-0.319***	0.776***	0.233*	0.267	
	(0.169)	(0.117)	(0.102)	(0.132)	(0.124)	(0.615)	
Share of staff submitted to REF	0.003	0.001	-0.002	-0.002	-0.000	-0.008	-0.003***
	(0.002)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.002)	(0.001)	(0.005)	(0.001)
Number of FTE staff in UOA	-0.004***	0.003***	-0.004***	0.001*	0.000	-0.000	-0.001***
	(0.001)	(0.000)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.000)	(0.002)	(0.000)
Number of funders	-0.002	0.007	-0.070***	0.042*	0.054***	0.333***	0.150***
	(0.042)	(0.022)	(0.018)	(0.023)	(0.013)	(0.072)	(0.009)
Number of researchers	-0.103***	-0.003	0.008	-0.005	0.012	0.169***	0.071***
	(0.036)	(0.010)	(0.009)	(0.011)	(0.008)	(0.046)	(0.008)
Case continued from 2014	-0.338	-0.208	-0.133	0.395***	0.099	1.396*	-0.113
	(0.287)	(0.132)	(0.129)	(0.133)	(0.126)	(0.725)	(0.079)
Regions	Not significant	Not significant	Not significant	Not significant	Significant	Significant	

Research fields	Significant	Significant	Significant	Significant	Significant	Not significant	
athrho	-0.024	-0.312	-0.395	0.228	0.731*	-0.057	
	(0.578)	(0.296)	(0.245)	(0.375)	(0.436)	(0.069)	
lnSigma						2.121***	
						(0.013)	
Constant	0.014	-1.949***	0.744***	-1.986***	-3.149***	2.628**	-0.546***
	(0.669)	(0.524)	(0.260)	(0.371)	(0.286)	(1.158)	(0.093)
Observations	2,998	2,998	2,998	2,998	2,998	2,998	6,209

Appendix C: Publications and research outputs

- **Working papers**

Baines, N., Rossi, F. & Wilson, E. (2026), Modes of engagement between universities and cultural institutions: implications for research impact, *Studies in Hegher Education* (under review).

Khakimova A., Rossi, F. & Baines, N. (2026), *Arts and Cultural Organisations as Partners in Societal Impact: Rethinking University Collaboration*, (Think Piece no 1), Centre Birkbeck's Centre for Innovation Management Research (CIMR).

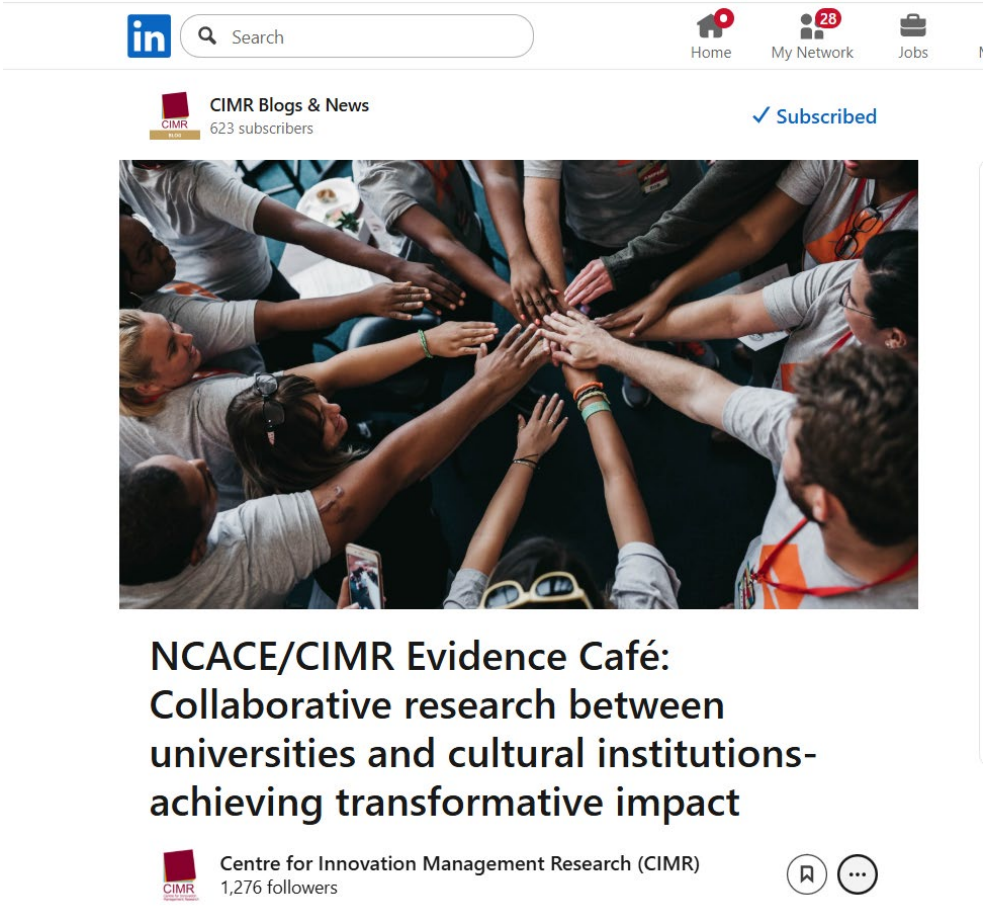
- Outputs in progress

The development of a call for papers for a special issue in a high-quality, relevant journal

The development of an academic paper based on in-depth interview data

Appendix D: Presentations and engagement activities

- **Evidence café** - organised by the National Centre for Academic and Cultural Exchange (NCACE) in partnership with Birkbeck's Centre for Innovation Management Research (CIMR) in October 2025 has delved into the topic of how partnerships between universities and the cultural sector can drive meaningful societal change.



https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/ncacecimr-evidence-caf%C3%A9-collaborative-6keqf/?trackingId=BLGPYUH5SFqJxUNhyVhweA%3D%3D

- **Workshop at the University of Leicester** – organised in February 2026 to present the findings to academic colleagues

- **Online talk given to the The Edward de Bono Institute for Creative Thinking and Innovation** – 27 April 2026

Presentation on the topic “Generating transformational societal impact from collaborations between universities and the arts and cultural sector” showcasing the results from the project

- **Example of blogs**

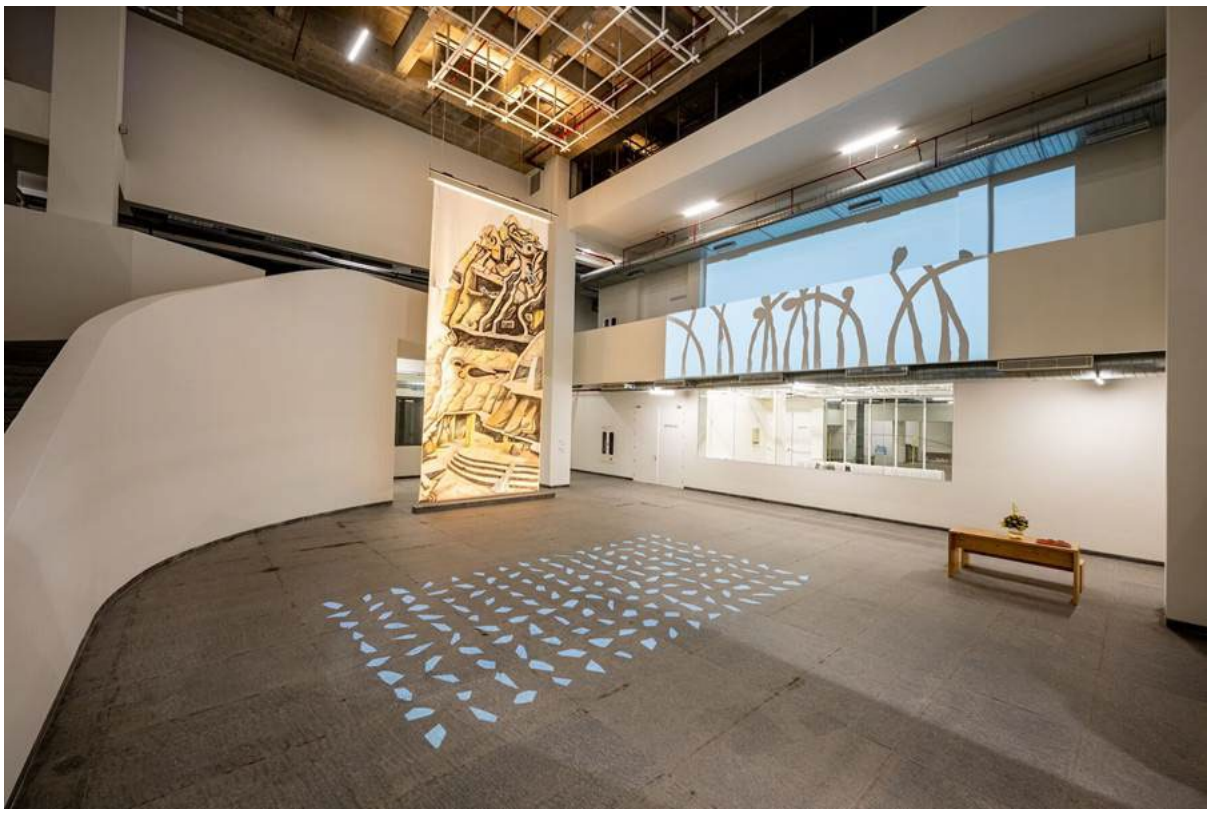
https://ncace.ac.uk/2025/12/02/collaborations-between-universities-and-cultural-institutions-achieving-transformative-research-impact-1/

When Universities and Cultural Institutions Collaborate: What Kind of Impact Do They Create?

Museums, libraries, and theatres do more than share research; they are active partners in producing knowledge and impact.

Universities are increasingly expected to demonstrate that their research benefits society. From influencing policy to addressing environmental challenges, the pressure to show “impact” has become central to how research is evaluated and funded. One of the ways universities achieve this impact is through collaboration with external partners. While partnerships with industry or government have received considerable attention, collaborations between universities and cultural institutions such as museums, libraries, archives, theatres, and heritage sites have been less studied.

Yet these collaborations are far from marginal. Cultural institutions play a vital role in preserving knowledge, engaging communities, and translating research into forms that reach the public. In our recent study, *Modes of engagement between universities and cultural institutions: implications for research impact*, we explore how partnerships between universities and cultural institutions shape the kinds of impact research can generate.



Academic research often reaches wider audiences through exhibitions and cultural spaces.

Cultural institutions as research partners

Cultural institutions are not simply venues for disseminating research. Many actively participate in the research process by contributing expertise, collections, archives, and public engagement platforms. Their missions such as educating the public, preserving heritage, and fostering cultural understanding align closely with universities' civic responsibilities.

Cultural institutions contribute expertise, collections, and archives that shape research from the earliest stages.

Despite this alignment, the role of cultural institutions within research ecosystems has often been overlooked in studies of knowledge production. Our research seeks to address this gap by examining how these collaborations influence both the nature and reach of research impact.

To do this, we analysed data from the UK Research Excellence Framework (REF) 2021 Impact Case Studies, which document how academic research creates benefits beyond academia. Out of more than 6,000 case studies, we identified 286 that involved cultural institutions as formal partners. Our analysis reveals that collaborations with cultural institutions follow two broad patterns, which correspond to different modes of knowledge production.

Two ways of producing knowledge

The first pattern resembles what scholars call Mode 1 knowledge production. This is the traditional form of academic research, where knowledge is largely generated within universities and within specific disciplines. In collaborations with cultural institutions, Mode 1 projects tend to involve smaller teams and fewer partners, often working closely with organisations such as museums or archives. These collaborations usually build on existing disciplinary knowledge and produce outputs closely aligned with the academic field. The impact generated by Mode 1 collaborations tends to be cultural and community focused. For example, research may inform exhibitions, enhance the interpretation of historical collections, or support cultural heritage preservation. These impacts are highly valuable, particularly for strengthening cultural understanding and enriching public engagement with knowledge.

The second pattern reflects Mode 2 knowledge production, which is more collaborative, interdisciplinary, and oriented toward solving real-world problems. Mode 2 projects involve larger and more diverse partnerships that may include universities, cultural organisations, government bodies, companies, and community groups. Because these collaborations bring together different types of expertise, they can generate impacts that extend beyond cultural domains. For instance, they may contribute to environmental sustainability initiatives, social policy discussions, technological innovation, or global challenges. In other words, Mode 2 collaborations often produce broader societal impacts, reaching wider audiences and addressing complex issues that require input from multiple sectors.

Cultural impact remains central

One of the key findings of our study is that the presence of cultural institutions significantly increases the likelihood that research generates cultural impact. Collaborations with museums, libraries, archives, theatres, and heritage organisations often translate academic knowledge into exhibitions, performances, digital archives, and other public-facing outputs that engage diverse audiences.

At the same time, the type of cultural institution involved matters. For example, partnerships with museums and galleries are strongly associated with cultural outcomes, while collaborations with natural science institutions such as botanical gardens or zoos are more likely to contribute to environmental or health-related impacts. This diversity highlights the different ways cultural institutions can contribute to knowledge creation and dissemination.

Collaborations with cultural institutions help translate academic research into experiences that reach wider audiences.

Why this matters for research policy

The findings also raise important questions about how research impact is evaluated. Current assessment systems, including the REF, often prioritise measurable global or economic impacts. However, the cultural and community benefits generated through

collaborations with cultural institutions may be harder to quantify. This can risk undervaluing forms of impact that enrich public life, strengthen cultural heritage, and foster deeper engagement with research.

Recognising the distinct contributions of cultural institutions is therefore crucial. These organisations act not only as custodians of knowledge but also as active co-producers of research, helping translate academic insights into forms that resonate with broader audiences.

Looking ahead

Our study suggests that collaborations between universities and cultural institutions represent a distinctive and important mode of knowledge production. Mode 1 collaborations deepen disciplinary expertise and support cultural engagement, while Mode 2 collaborations broaden research impact by integrating diverse perspectives and addressing societal challenges.

Rather than seeing these approaches as competing models, universities and cultural institutions can benefit from recognising their complementary strengths. By designing collaborations that draw on both modes, research partnerships can achieve both depth and breadth of impact. As universities continue to expand their engagement with society, cultural institutions are likely to remain key partners in translating research into meaningful public value.

Acknowledgement

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Reference

Baines, N., Rossi, F. and Wilson, E. (under review). *Modes of engagement between universities and cultural institutions: implications for research impact.*