

The Research Operations Gap

Five frictions holding good research and innovation work back - and a practical 30-day response.

ONE ECOSYSTEM. SHARED OUTCOMES.

Research ambition has moved quickly. The operations around it have not always kept pace. This perspective follows the connections between opportunity, award delivery, manual work, capability and assurance.

THE CENTRAL ARGUMENT

Better outcomes depend on the whole system working well.

The Research Operations Gap is the distance between what an organisation expects research and innovation to achieve and the everyday systems, capacity and controls available to support it.

01

A field perspective

Drawn from hands-on delivery, training, events, tool use and conversations across research operations.

02

Not a sector benchmark

The five gaps are hypotheses for each organisation to test against its own evidence.

03

A practical response

Choose one material friction, establish a baseline, test a focused change and decide what follows.

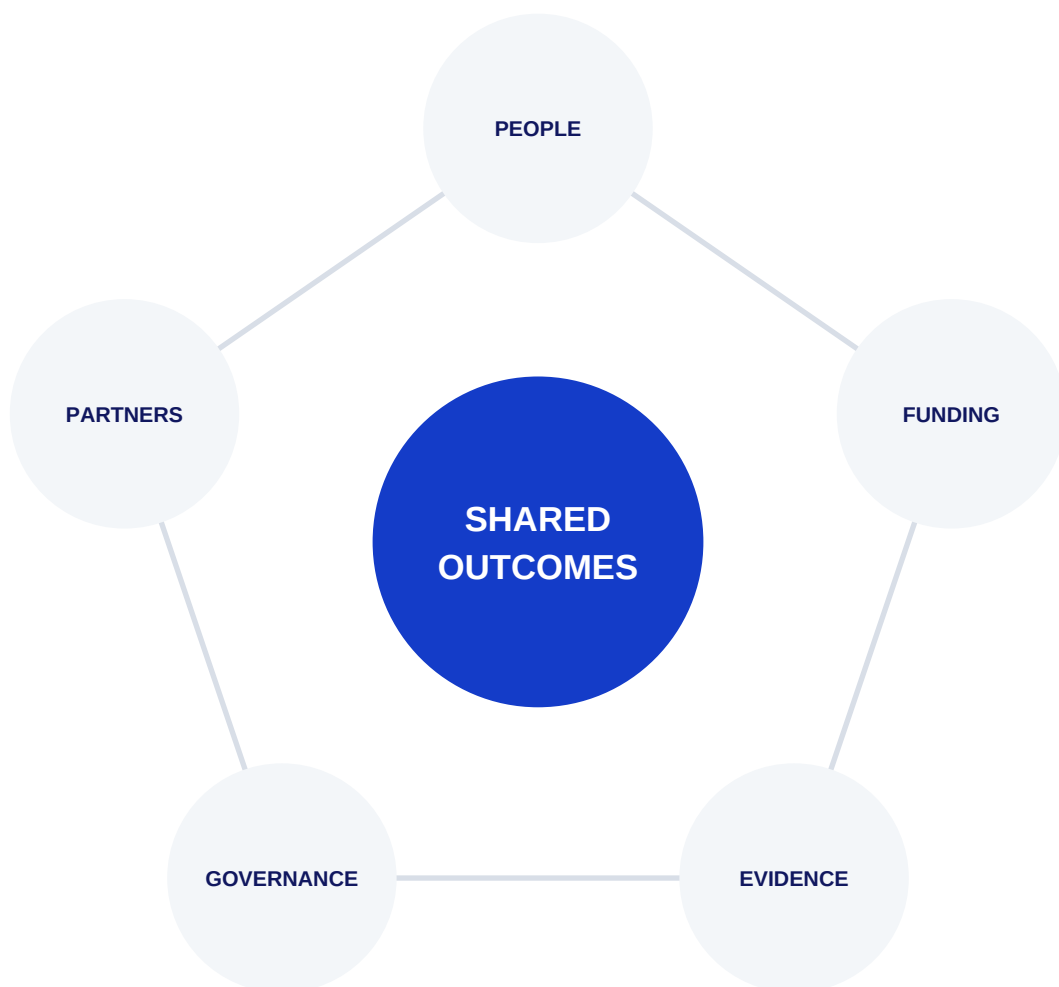
EVIDENCE BOUNDARY

This edition does not present invented survey findings or imply that every organisation faces the same conditions. The next edition will be strengthened through structured interviews and contributed operational data from across the ecosystem.

THE OPERATING VIEW

The work crosses every organisational boundary.

Pre-award, post-award, finance, governance and leadership are not separate problems. Pressure moves between them.



A precise change still needs an owner. The whole-system test asks whether that change also works for the people and processes upstream and downstream.

RECURRING FRICTION 1 OF 5

01

Opportunity intelligence does not connect to people.

THE PATTERN

Generic alerts create noise while expertise and partner information are held in different places. Matching depends on individual memory.

WHAT IT COSTS

Relevant calls arrive late, partnerships have less time to form and development capacity is used without a shared view of fit.

THE FIRST MOVE

Connect live calls, eligibility, expertise and priorities. Make the reason for each match visible and reviewable.

A QUESTION FOR YOUR ORGANISATION

Can we explain why this opportunity reached this person - and what happens next?

RECURRING FRICTION 2 OF 5

02

Awards begin without a shared operating picture.

THE PATTERN

The award moves from application to contract, finance and delivery without one point where conditions become a shared plan.

WHAT IT COSTS

Ownership is assumed, context is lost at handover and issues emerge when the project is already moving.

THE FIRST MOVE

Run a controlled award launch covering scope, budget, conditions, milestones, partners, evidence and escalation.

A QUESTION FOR YOUR ORGANISATION

Could every key person describe the same award position, responsibilities and next actions?

RECURRING FRICTION 3 OF 5

03

Manual effort hides the decision.

THE PATTERN

Skilled staff assemble, copy and check files before they can begin the professional review the organisation actually needs.

WHAT IT COSTS

Capacity is absorbed, variation grows and useful conversations with project leads happen later.

THE FIRST MOVE

Map each handling step. Automate what is repeatable and design the output around the accountable decision.

A QUESTION FOR YOUR ORGANISATION

How much of the cycle creates insight - and how much only prepares the file?

RECURRING FRICTION 4 OF 5

04

Capability is held by individuals.

THE PATTERN

People learn through shadowing, remembered exceptions and asking the colleague who has handled that funder before.

WHAT IT COSTS

Experienced staff become a bottleneck; onboarding, cover and consistent service become harder.

THE FIRST MOVE

Combine structured onboarding, current guidance, supported practice and a clear route to professional judgement.

A QUESTION FOR YOUR ORGANISATION

If one experienced colleague left tomorrow, which answers and processes would leave with them?

RECURRING FRICTION 5 OF 5

05

Assurance arrives after the useful decision point.

THE PATTERN

Governance is treated as a final check. Policies exist, but the working process, evidence and ownership do not always follow them.

WHAT IT COSTS

Problems surface close to a claim, review or audit when deadlines are tight and options are narrow.

THE FIRST MOVE

Trace material requirements through live work and evidence. Feed findings back into setup, monitoring and training.

A QUESTION FOR YOUR ORGANISATION

What would we want to know six months before the formal assurance activity begins?

THE PRESSURE MOVES

Five gaps. One operating chain.



Whole-system thinking does not make ownership vague. It helps each owner make a change that holds up across the connected work.

START SMALL ENOUGH TO LEARN

Understand. Baseline. Test. Decide.

Choose one material friction that people recognise and leaders care about. A first month should create evidence and momentum.

WEEK 1

01

Understand the work

Follow the task, speak with the people closest to it and agree the outcome and senior owner.

WEEK 2

02

Make the baseline visible

Use a measure the organisation can reproduce: time, delay, rework, exceptions, exposure or volume.

WEEK 3

03

Test the priority change

Try the tool, control or delivery change with real constraints and a focused enough scope to learn.

WEEK 4

04

Decide what follows

Show what changed, what remains and whether to adopt, stop, improve or scale the approach.

FIVE QUESTIONS

Where is the gap most visible for you?

Use evidence, not instinct alone. Mark the question that would create the most useful leadership conversation now.

01

Can we match relevant opportunities to current expertise without relying on who one person knows?

☐

02

Do project, research operations and finance begin with the same award picture?

☐

03

How much skilled time is spent copying, checking or rebuilding information?

☐

04

Can new colleagues learn the role without relying mainly on shadowing?

☐

05

Can we trace material funder requirements to a current control and usable evidence?

☐

For the full five-question Research Operations Health Check, visit rkesupport.com/health-check

BUILD THE NEXT EVIDENCE BASE

Contribute to the next edition.

A stronger sector perspective needs original evidence. We are inviting universities, institutes, funded organisations and partners to contribute operational data or take part in a confidential interview.

START A CONVERSATION

service@rkesupport.com

Use 'Research Operations Gap' in the subject line.

OFFICIAL CONTEXT REVIEWED

UKRI strategy 2026 to 2031

UKRI delivery plan 2026 to 2027

UKRI funding assurance programme

Reviewed 1 August 2026. This report is general information, not legal, tax or funder-specific advice. Always use the live terms for the relevant award or competition.