How universities can support Free Trade Agreements (FTAs)

The Russell Group represents 24 leading research-intensive universities across the UK. They are highly international, with over 280,000 students and staff from overseas and partnerships across the globe. These links can help attract inward investment into the UK, build our national capability across critical technologies and tackle global issues such as climate change. The UK now has an exciting opportunity to build new trade agreements across the globe that will create even more of these valuable connections.

Our research-intensive universities have a lot to offer if they can be part of early conversations during development stages of FTAs and are ready to work with government to ensure new agreements build on the UK’s strategic advantage and help to meet our ambition of becoming a science superpower by 2030.

How can FTAs accelerate the UK’s science superpower ambition?

Trade deals that support cooperation in research and higher education can help the UK meet its ambition of becoming a global science superpower, boost our economy and create opportunity. It is important that FTAs include – or enable parallel discussions around:

1. Supporting research partnerships through developing strategic research and innovation initiatives, including dedicated research and innovation joint funding programmes. For example, the new UK-Australia FTA has the world’s first high-level FTA innovation section and it is already generating enhanced cooperation between Russell Group universities and their research-intensive counterparts in the Australian Group of 8. Excluding trusted partners from countries with which we have FTAs from some research security legislation could incentivise collaboration and boost FDI in UK R&D.

2. Increasing mobility by enhancing the two-way flow of talent can increase opportunities for collaboration on basic research. FTAs could include new initiatives to support PhD students and early career researchers to spend time in each other’s research universities and businesses, through funded fellowship and exchange programmes. Creating additional places for programmes such as the Youth Mobility Scheme could help attract even more of the best research talent to the UK.

3. Promoting UK higher education abroad, encouraging a diverse pool of international students and facilitating global student exchanges.

4. Mutual recognition of qualifications so that all graduates of our universities have their qualifications recognised in countries with which we have FTAs, supporting partnerships, business, and mobility.

How does the global reputation of UK Universities help the UK?

- In 2019/20 UK universities generated £1.47bn in research income from international sources
- DfE analysis in 2021 estimated UK education exports were worth £25bn in 2019, with 70% of revenues coming from HE.
- Independent analysis found the total impact of international students for the UK economy was £29bn in 2021.