



RUSSELL GROUP

Research security: a shared responsibility

R&D is critical for economic growth and national resilience, and UK universities are committed to safeguarding vital research from hostile actors

Universities are key to the UK's economic and national security. Russell Group universities contribute groundbreaking R&D, delivering innovations that are transforming the way the UK responds to global challenges such as climate change and pandemics, ensuring a safer and stronger nation.

International collaboration and the recruitment of talented international researchers maximise the local and global impact of our universities' research. Our partnerships have helped Russell Group universities build dynamic regional R&D clusters, advance technologies supporting sustainable development goals, underpin next-generation manufacturing, and secure more than £1bn every year in research grants and contracts from international organisations,¹ all of which is helping to drive growth and wealth creation across the UK.

Our universities recognise the strength of their R&D in strategically important fields makes the UK a target for hostile international actors seeking to access and misappropriate university research for their own gain. Threats range from cyber-attacks aimed at stealing sensitive information to organisations obscuring links with overseas militaries when proposing joint research collaborations.² Research security aims to protect university R&D from these threats and boost the UK's role as a trusted, reliable partner.

A vital security partner for government

Research security is a shared national responsibility, and our universities work closely with government departments and the security services to identify and tackle hostile activity. This direct collaboration is essential to the UK's national resilience, with rapid sharing of critical information enabling quick responses to new or developing threats not covered by existing legislation. Notable initiatives since 2019 include:

- **DSIT's Research Collaboration and Advice Team (RCAT)** with regional offices advising individual universities about the risks of their international research activity, and potential mitigation strategies.
- **Increased engagement between universities and security services**, with working groups led by the National Protective Security Authority (NPSA) and National Cyber Security Centre (NCSC).
- **Regular contact between sector groups and security leads across Whitehall**, including DSIT, DfE, and the Counter Proliferation and Arms Control Centre (CPACC) within the FCDO.

University groups have supported capacity building in the research security space by developing guidance, establishing working groups with government representation, and facilitating the sharing of best practice nationally and internationally. Sector-led efforts include:³

- **Universities UK guidance** articulating risks and a new framework for managing them (2020).⁴
- The university-led **Higher Education Export Control Association (HEECA)** developing national training modules and shared best practice around export controls.
- **Increased engagement with counterparts** from like-minded countries, for example organising a series of best-practice workshops across Europe in 2023.

Universities have redoubled efforts to counter hostile threats

Our universities have responded to emerging threats by bolstering internal defences with enhanced due diligence, targeted training programmes for key staff and robust policies aligned with government and sector guidance. For instance, staff are now typically asked to use ‘burner’ laptops and phones when travelling to high-risk jurisdictions.

As an example of wider institutional policy changes, one of our universities introduced a requirement in 2021 for all researchers to submit a ‘project notification form’ to the university’s central research security team before entering international partnerships. This has so far resulted in reviewing 3,160 overseas collaborations for potential risks, with some cases escalated to senior leadership for further scrutiny and due diligence – ultimately enabling and supporting safe research.

Universities recognise more can be done to build on recent progress to help institutions respond quickly to emerging threats. **A new Research Security Fund would allow universities to build additional capacity and capability** by hiring specialists, upgrading physical and cyber infrastructure, and giving researchers the ability to recognise and manage risks associated with new overseas partnerships more effectively. A similar fund is already operating successfully in Canada.⁵

New and enhanced regulation and legislation

Since NPSA launched its Trusted Research campaign in 2019, the Government has introduced or enhanced **five pillars of legislation** with research security provisions. Robust safeguards are welcome: the priority now is to let them bed in and ensure universities are resourced to implement them effectively.

Legislation	Summary
Academic Technology Approval Scheme, FCDO	Vetting for incoming international STEM researchers from certain states to prevent work aiding overseas militaries.
The Export Control Order, DBT	License required for exporting technologies with actual or potential military application.
National Security and Investment Act, Cabinet Office	Approval required for investments in sensitive areas and powers to call-in and block any R&D transfer that undermines national security.
National Security Act, Home Office	Will require registration of a range of activities involving foreign governments and introduces tougher penalties for R&D espionage.
Higher Education Freedom of Speech Act, DfE	From 2025, will require universities in England to report overseas income over a certain value.

¹ HESA open data, total research grant and contract income from EU and non-EU sources.

² For more, see <https://www.mi5.gov.uk/news/director-general-speech-at-university-of-glasgow>

³ Strategic, sector-led research security working groups include the Russell Group Trusted Research Forum, the Higher Education ATAS Working Group, the Higher Education Security Forum and more.

⁴ <https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/what-we-do/policy-and-research/publications/managing-risks-internationalisation>

⁵ https://www.rsf-fsr.gc.ca/apply-demande/research_security-secrite-recherche-eng.aspx

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