uk arma

Association of Research
Managers and Administrators

Financial sustainability of research

Themes and recommendations from ARMA workshops

Project funded by Research England

Contact: enquiries@arma.ac.uk

Contents

uk arma

Financial sustainability of research

Themes and recommendations from ARMA workshops

Executive summary

The ARMA Task & Finish Group on Financial Sustainability of Research was established in 2024 in recognition of the growing financial challenges facing higher education institutions and their potential impact on the UK research ecosystem. As the financial sustainability of universities becomes increasingly precarious, there is a risk that the long-term value and strategic importance of research can be overshadowed by more immediate operational pressures and viewed primarily as a cost rather than an investment. This has significant implications not only for institutional research capacity, but also for innovation, economic growth, the delivery of wider national strategic priorities and the societal benefits that research generates.

As research management professionals working across UK universities and research organisations, ARMA members are uniquely placed to observe, often in real time, the decisions institutions are making in response to financial pressures and the consequences these decisions may have for research activity, infrastructure, talent development and future competitiveness. Their broad perspective across disciplines, funding mechanisms and institutional contexts provides valuable insight into emerging trends and challenges affecting the sector.

Research is often underrepresented in discussions about the finances of higher education, despite being one of the core missions of universities and an essential contributor to national prosperity, public policy, and societal wellbeing. Ensuring that research remains sustainable and resilient in the face of financial constraint is therefore a matter of significant importance for institutions, funders and policymakers alike.

This report summarises the insights, experiences and recommended actions arising from two in-person workshops exploring the impact of financial pressures on research and identifying potential approaches to improve the sustainability of the research system.

The workshops were supported by Research England (RE) and brought together a range of research management professionals to share perspectives and evidence from across the sector. In addition to sharing our findings with RE and the wider ARMA membership, the outputs from this work will inform future ARMA training resources and sector guidance, helping to ensure broad access to practical support and contemporary insights on this increasingly important issue.

Background

For decades, the UK's research base has been cross subsidised through student fees, but with declining numbers, and domestic fees not keeping pace with inflation, institutions are having to make hard choices where to make cuts. Research risks being a casualty and there is a risk that the UK is sleepwalking into losing national assets and limiting future UK growth. Alongside this, challenges in student recruitment are leading to sector shrinkage in terms of courses that can be offered and reductions in staff. These combined pressures are impacting on both current research capacity and the future talent pipeline. The ARMA workshops explored key barriers to financial sustainability of research and actions that could be taken to improve the position.

Two workshops (funded by Research England) were staged (in Leeds and London) to engage with the wider research professional community on the topic of financial sustainability for research. The workshops were structured to reflect our objectives to:

- Better understand the impact of financial pressures on research capability
- Explore potential actions different actors could take
- Understand ARMA member training and support needs to take forward

Workshops were advertised well in advance, and travel bursaries were made available to support attendance, recognising the financial challenges facing the sector. There were over 60 attendees from across the sector, representing multiple regions and organisation types. The workshops were designed following two surveys that were run, which highlighted the need for action in this space. The first survey was held in summer 2024 and revealed signs of strain in the sector, changes in approaching external funding and impacts on research culture.

The following sections set out key points, recommendations for action and illustrative quotes from group discussions, combining both events. Many points are interrelated highlighting how action is needed by all actors in the system – funders, HEIs (multiple teams) and researchers themselves. The focus is on capturing actions that could be taken to improve the current position across funders, institutions and ARMA.

Key Findings from the Evidence

1. Financial sustainability and strategic value of research

The workshops highlighted that financial pressures across higher education are no longer a future concern but are already influencing behaviour across the research lifecycle. Institutions are making difficult decisions about where to direct limited resources, resulting in changes to research priorities, support structures and investment decisions. While many of these measures are intended to address immediate financial challenges, there is growing concern that they may have unintended consequences for the long-term health and competitiveness of the UK research system.

Participants emphasised the need for urgent action to ensure that financial constraints do not gradually erode the UK's internationally recognised research capability, reputation and attractiveness as a destination for talented researchers, collaborators and investors. Without intervention, there is a risk that short-term financial pressures will lead to longer-term damage that is far more difficult and costly to reverse.

A recurring theme throughout the discussions was the way research is often presented within institutional financial discussions. Too frequently, research is viewed through the lens of direct financial return or cost recovery, leading to it being characterised as a financial "loss". This framing fails to recognise the wider value of research, including its contribution to innovation, economic growth, societal benefit, institutional reputation, teaching quality and the attraction and retention of talented staff and students.

Workshop participants also expressed concern about the impact that financial pressures are having on research culture, particularly for early- and mid-career researchers. Reduced opportunities for development, increasing workloads and greater uncertainty about career progression risk creating a less supportive and less attractive environment for the next generation of researchers. Participants highlighted the importance of maintaining investment in people as a critical component of sustaining research excellence.

The reduction in institutional capacity and discretionary funding was identified as a particularly significant challenge. Many universities have less flexibility to support activities that underpin future research success, including pipeline development, mentoring schemes, pump-priming funds and initiatives designed to help researchers secure external funding. While such investments may not deliver immediate returns, they are often essential for building future research capacity and ensuring a sustainable and diverse research ecosystem.

2. Research finance, post award delivery and professional services capacity

Research finance and post-award delivery emerged as a key theme throughout the workshops. While it is a highly specialised discipline that sits at the heart of research delivery, participants felt that its role is not always well understood, valued or used effectively by wider professional services teams, funders or academics. As financial pressures intensify, there is a growing need to recognise research finance not simply as an operational function, but as a strategic capability that supports institutional decision-making, risk management and the long-term sustainability of research activity.

Participants highlighted the importance of raising the profile of research finance across the sector and fostering closer engagement with related professional communities. Greater collaboration between organisations such as ARMA and the British Universities Finance Directors Group (BUFDG) was seen as an important opportunity to build understanding, share expertise and ensure that financial sustainability considerations are better integrated across institutional strategies and practices.

The workshops also identified growing concerns around post-award activity, which is becoming increasingly complex and resource intensive. Rising funder expectations, more detailed reporting requirements, and increasing demands around compliance, assurance and impact are creating a more significant administrative burden for research support teams. While these requirements are often introduced with positive intentions, their cumulative effect is placing considerable pressure on already stretched professional services functions.

Despite its importance, post-award work remains under-recognised within many institutions. Participants emphasised that effective post-award support is fundamental to financial sustainability, ensuring that awards are managed efficiently, obligations are met, confidence in delivery is maintained and researchers can focus on their core activities. Strong post-award management is not only essential for compliance and audit purposes but also plays a critical role in shaping the overall researcher experience and an institution's reputation with funders.

At the same time, professional services capacity is being reduced in response to wider financial constraints, while the volume and complexity of funder requirements continue to increase. This combination creates a significant challenge for institutions and raises concerns about the resilience of the research support ecosystem. Participants warned that there is a real risk of weakening delivery capacity at precisely the point when the sector needs it most, potentially undermining both the effectiveness and sustainability of future research activity. Participants identified several factors driving these challenges, including increasing funder requirements around compliance and assurance, growing complexity of collaborative research projects, inflationary pressures and reductions in institutional professional services capacity. Many felt that the cumulative burden created by multiple individual requirements was becoming a sustainability issue in its own right.

3. Sector influence, funder engagement and ARMA's collective role

Participants felt there was a significant opportunity to strengthen engagement between funders and the research management profession on matters relating to research funding policy and operational delivery. While funders routinely engage with researchers on scientific priorities, research challenges and funding opportunities, there was a strong view that engagement on the practical design and operation of funding mechanisms is often more limited. As a result, decisions about processes, requirements and implementation can sometimes be taken without fully understanding the implications for those responsible for delivering and managing research within institutions.

The workshops highlighted the importance of recognising these as distinct but complementary forms of engagement. Input from researchers is vital in shaping research agendas and funding priorities, while research management and professional services staff bring valuable expertise on how funding schemes work in practice. Participants felt that more systematic involvement of these practitioners could help ensure that funding mechanisms are proportionate, efficient and better aligned with the realities of institutional delivery.

There was a strong consensus that the people who make research funding work on a day-to-day basis should have a greater role in the design, implementation and review of funding programmes. Research managers, research finance professionals and other specialist support staff have unique insights into the practical challenges and unintended consequences that can arise from funding policies and administrative processes. Drawing on this expertise earlier and more consistently could improve both the effectiveness of funding schemes and the experience of those applying for and managing awards.

Participants identified several areas where stronger engagement could generate practical benefits, including reducing unnecessary administrative burden, improving consistency of funder requirements, identifying unintended consequences earlier in scheme development, improving alignment between funder and institutional processes, and ensuring delivery costs are better recognised within funding models. Participants highlighted positive examples of engagement, including work with the UKRI Funding Policy Team, and encouraged further development of these mechanisms so that research management, research finance and post-award professionals can contribute more consistently to future policy development and funding design.

Participants also expressed a strong appetite for ARMA to play a more prominent role as a collective voice for the profession. As financial and operational pressures across the sector continue to grow, there was a clear desire for ARMA to help articulate shared challenges, evidence emerging issues and represent the perspectives of research management professionals in discussions with funders, policymakers and sector bodies.

Alongside this advocacy role, participants felt that ARMA has an important opportunity to support the sector through the development of practical resources, guidance and good practice. There was particular interest in resources that help institutions navigate financial pressures, strengthen research sustainability and share effective approaches across the sector. More broadly, participants saw ARMA as being well placed to help influence the wider conditions needed for sustainable research delivery, ensuring that the expertise of the profession is recognised and utilised in shaping the future of the UK research system.

Recommendations for Funders

1. Greater consistency of approach and clarity of expectations

1.1 **Funders should provide clearer and more consistent eligibility guidance across schemes where it has not been previously provided, including explicit guidance on staff costs, project management, indirect costs, estates, facilities, compliance-related costs and wider delivery costs.** Ambiguous or inconsistent guidance creates avoidable work for applicants, research offices, finance teams and funders. It can lead to different interpretations across institutions, delays in bid development and uncertainty during audit. Clearer guidance would reduce clarification queries, improve budget accuracy, support smoother award set-up and help ensure that funded projects are costed on a realistic and consistent basis.

> *"Many different funders, huge variety in schemes and funding models creates a lot of complexity for research support, academics, decision makers."*
>
> *"[we need] comprehensive eligibility guidelines made available at bid development."*
>
> *"Overheads - be clear what's eligible rather than at discretion of institution. Example of admin posts on UKRI grants."*
>
> *"Funder comms are not precise enough around match and academic expectation still there."*

2. Reform funding approach

2.1 **Funders should introduce review points for longer awards so that budgets can be revisited where there are significant changes in inflation, salary costs, employer costs or other unavoidable delivery costs.** Multi-year awards are often planned in a financial environment that changes significantly during delivery. Review points would improve project deliverability, reduce the risk of uncosted extensions or reduced outputs, and give funders better visibility of financial pressures affecting their portfolio.

> *"Re-evaluation points for longer projects with option to change budget spend."*
>
> *"Ability to review funding request/awarded amount at intervals on long term projects to help combat inflation/old overhead rates/government enacted changes (NI increases)."*

2.2 **Funders should use more consistent and transparent inflation assumptions across schemes, particularly for long-term awards and programmes with significant staffing commitments.** Different approaches to inflation create uncertainty for institutions and make it harder to plan staffing, manage commitments and assess the real value of an award over time. More consistent assumptions would improve budget comparability, reduce hidden financial risk and support more reliable delivery across the life of an award.

> *"Long term planning for big projects is difficult where funder inflation rates do not reflect inflation."*

2.3 **Funders should review budget structures so that staff costs, directly attributable delivery costs and overheads are presented clearly and assessed in ways that support fair participation across institutions.** Current budget structures can make it difficult to distinguish the real cost of staff, specialist support and infrastructure from wider overheads. Clearer structures would improve value-for-money assessment, make costs easier to compare, reduce negotiation at award stage and support a more diverse range of institutions to participate.

> *"Radically change the funding model to keep staff costs separate to allow for HEI with different overhead rates to participate on equal footing - keep budget limits for non-staff categories only."*
>
> *"[helps] When funders already insist on cost recovery plans as part of the application (happens with some large grants already). Things will change but it brings an awareness to the academic and institution of the cost of delivery, especially once the grant funding ends."*

2.4 **Funders should work towards more consistent recognition of the full economic cost of research, including greater transparency where schemes are not intended to cover full costs.** Persistent under-recovery means institutions must subsidise research from other income sources, many of which are now under pressure. Greater transparency on cost coverage would support more realistic institutional decision-making, reduce delivery risk and help funders understand where funding models may unintentionally limit capacity, participation or long-term sustainability.

> *"Charitable funding is a huge point of contention due to poor recoverability. Charitable Funding QR does not come close to covering the gap in charitable funding."*
>
> *"Even a small contribution from charity funders towards overhead costs would make a huge difference to the viability and long-term sustainability of these grants (e.g. a fixed % or investigator time)."*

2.5 **Funders should define a clearer and more consistent approach to wider research delivery costs, including programme support staff, project management, technical expertise, research facilities, indirect costs and Transparent Approach to Costing (TRAC)-related costs.** These costs are often essential to deliver complex projects well but can be treated inconsistently across schemes and during audit. Clear recognition of delivery costs would improve project management, reduce delays, support compliance and increase confidence that funded work can be delivered to the expected standard.

> *"Having clarity and consistency on costing in technical expertise / research facility staff costs into research projects and what funders allow (not sure this is in place now)."*
>
> *"Funded grant delivery e.g. project management for larger bids across all funders [would help cost recovery]. Support efficient grant delivery (reduce delays and uncosted extensions)."*
>
> *"State in the call documentation that core functions/full costs are essential to include (e.g. referencing projects without a project manager will be viewed less favourably and would require additional justification)."*
>
> *"Moving costs from indirectly apportioned (indirect/estates) to directly attributable on individual projects (this is effective for cost recovery if handled well). [but] Audit requirements and lack of clarity from funders can act as a barrier here."*
>
> *"Institutional TRAC overheads being perceived as "too high" when everyone has to use the same methodology. Issue at reviewer stage and partner negotiation stage."*

2.6 **Funders should provide clear explanations when costs are considered ineligible, including guidance on acceptable alternatives where possible.** Blanket rejection of costs without explanation creates uncertainty and repeat queries. Clearer explanations would help institutions learn from decisions, improve future applications, support fairer treatment across institutions and reduce avoidable follow-up with funders.

2.7 **Funders should support greater stability and predictability in institutional QR-related funding and associated distribution mechanisms.** Stable year-on-year funding helps institutions manage financial pressures, plan strategically, and absorb the complexity created by different grant funding models. Greater predictability would support more sustainable institutional decision-making and help protect the capacity needed to deliver externally funded research effectively.

3. Reduce administration and process burden

The cost of supporting funder requirements in administering application and delivery is increasing and contributing to low recovery for institutions. There were two areas which participants continually highlighted action is needed: post award and demand management.

Demand management

This was a strong theme in discussions on increasing burden of work to universities when imposing limits on applications, with at times ambiguous communications from funders varying from call to call. This creates additional administrative work (for research offices and academics who are involved in internal application review) and time lost while institutions debate whether demand management (DM) is needed or not and run processes which add limited value.

> *"Demand management- say there is or isn't, don't just advise it is a good idea."*
>
> *"Funders understanding DM is not cost saving - it passes the cost onto institutions and has a huge impact on all institutions, but especially smaller institutions. DM is a barrier to engagement in research with implications wider than type of institution. It has EDI implications and research culture implications."*

3.1 **Funders should state clearly and early whether demand management applies to a funding opportunity, including any institutional caps, selection requirements or expectations for internal prioritisation.** Unclear demand management expectations transfer cost and complexity to institutions and can create barriers for smaller institutions, early career researchers and underrepresented groups. Early clarity would reduce confusion, improve application quality, support fairer internal selection processes and help funders receive better-developed proposals aligned to scheme priorities.

Post award

In recent years there have been new requirements for reporting and compliance (e.g. EDI data, trusted research) which add costs.

> *"People put off applying for funding due to admin creep / low success rates."*
>
> *"Funder rules e.g. timesheets."*
>
> *"Admin creep' of compliance and regulatory requirements discourages grant applications."*
>
> *"Post award burden increasing but can't be included in grants."*

3.2 Funders should clarify whether new compliance, assurance, reporting and regulatory requirements can be costed to grants, particularly where they require new systems, staff time or specialist expertise. Requirements linked to areas such as EDI reporting, trusted research, environmental metrics, assurance and monitoring can add significant post-award work. Clear cost eligibility would improve compliance, reduce delays, strengthen assurance and help ensure that funder requirements are implemented consistently and well.

Misalignment between funder processes and institutional systems (e.g. contracting, timelines) were raised, along with approaches which allow applicants to bypass institutional sign-off and research office involvement creating delivery challenges later on.

> *"IUK need to use the funding service to ensure institutional sign off [on costings]."*
>
> *"Funding model or process being compatible with HEI award set up and contracting processes. Case in point ARIA: reserve the right to significantly revise submitted bids (milestones, budgets) and requesting quick turnaround between award and kick-off (even on multi-party bids)."*
>
> *"Ensure funders work with research offices when bids are submitted incorrectly and need to be withdrawn- Innovate UK, looking at you!."*

Recommendations for Institutions

Institutions have a critical role in strengthening the financial sustainability of research by improving internal decision-making, aligning incentives, supporting professional services capacity and reducing avoidable internal burden.

1. Strengthen institutional costing and recovery policies

1.1 Institutions should review and strengthen their costing, pricing and cost recovery policies across research, contract research and consultancy. Clearer internal policies would support more consistent decision-making, reduce ad hoc exceptions and help staff make informed choices about the financial implications of different funding opportunities.

> *"Costing models reviewed and more complex nuances for different opportunities to max cost recovery."*
>
> *"Tightening up policies on contract research and consultancy."*

1.2 **Institutions should provide clearer internal guidance on funder recovery rates, eligibility thresholds and the circumstances in which lower recovery may be acceptable.** This would help academic and professional services staff understand the trade-offs involved in different funding routes, while ensuring that decisions to support strategically important activity are transparent and aligned with institutional priorities.

> *"make clear potential for recovery to academics considering bidding. Red/amber/green funders on sustainability - influences behaviour on choices to go to or where to work to improve."*
>
> *"[place] small grants limit but there are career stage trade-offs and will impact on ECRs (and other nuances)."*

1.3 **Institutions should ensure that research support and finance staff are empowered to apply agreed policies and are backed by senior leaders when challenging unsustainable costings or proposed exceptions.** Consistent senior support would reduce pressure on individual staff, improve governance and help ensure that exceptions are considered deliberately rather than becoming the default position.

> *"Sticking with policies - Tendency to give overhead waivers too easily."*
>
> *"Senior pressure around costings from academics different to finance messaging."*
>
> *"PS colleagues being empowered to say 'no' or to require change and then being backed up by more senior colleagues."*

2. Build stronger relationships between research and finance teams

2.1 **Institutions should strengthen collaboration between research offices, research finance teams and central finance functions.** Shared understanding of funder rules, cost recovery, risk and institutional priorities would support better financial planning and ensure that research is treated as core institutional business rather than as a marginal or exceptional activity.

> *''Importance of the role and attitude of the CFO and Finance department that accepts research as core business, understands it accordingly and works with Research senior managers to set appropriate policy and processes."*

3. Align incentives with sustainable research behaviour

3.1 **Institutions should review promotion, workload, performance and income targets to ensure they do not unintentionally incentivise unsustainable bidding behaviour.** Overemphasis on bid volume or short-term income can increase pressure on researchers and support teams, encourage applications with poor recovery, and create additional burden for funders. Incentives should recognise quality, feasibility, strategic fit and sustainable delivery.

> *"Incentives - promotion pathways pushing people to apply for grants. Academic assessment based on bid activity (any bid, no matter if feasible)."*
>
> *"Metrics/KPIs used in the annual review process which have unintended consequences in the way it drives behaviour."*
>
> *"Overfocus on short-term income generation, often chasing small pots of funding that under-recover when you consider the relative cost of securing and managing the funding."*

3.2 **Institutions should consider the impact of teaching, workload and staffing pressures on researchers' ability to develop and deliver high-quality research.** Protecting time for research development and delivery is essential to maintaining research capacity, supporting career development and avoiding a culture in which staff are encouraged to seek funding without sufficient time to deliver it well.

> *"Academics having to cover teaching from others and then having no time themselves for research."*
>
> *"Tension between teaching expansion and research capacity."*

4. Invest in research support capacity and skills

4.1 **Institutions should invest in the skills and capacity of research support teams, including research finance, post-award, commercial income, contracts and assurance expertise.** As funder requirements and income routes become more complex, professional services teams need the capacity and skills to support sustainable growth, manage risk and translate financial sustainability into practical guidance for researchers and leaders.

> *"We have to find a way to promote the benefits of improved financial sustainability to individuals, groups and Institutions, to gain better buy-in."*
>
> *"[the] Shifting funder mix towards contract and commercial- Prof services need skills to drive commercial income as well as public funder income."*

5. Streamline internal processes and reduce avoidable duplication

5.1 **Institutions should review internal research processes to identify avoidable duplication, delays and disproportionate approval requirements.** Streamlined processes would reduce administrative burden, improve the researcher experience and free up professional services capacity for higher-value support, particularly in complex multi-partner bids and awards.

> *"Wasted time on between HEI/ partner negotiations due to desire for control and duplication of effort?."*

5.2 **Institutions should explore shared approaches where this could reduce duplicated effort across the sector, particularly in areas such as due diligence, assurance, governance and training.** Shared resources and common approaches would be especially valuable for smaller institutions and could improve consistency while reducing repeated work across organisations.

> *"Shared investment to support organisations to be able to better deal with governance and avoid duplication across the sector e.g. due diligence, assurance etc."*

Recommendations for Shared Action

1. Build a shared understanding of the real cost and value of research

1.1 **Funders and institutions should work together to communicate that sustainable costing is compatible with value for money and high-quality research.** Clear, consistent messages would help counter the perception that lower-cost proposals are more competitive, reduce pressure to artificially reduce budgets and support more realistic costing across the research system.

> *"[funders to] Reinforce the message that a lower cost project does not improve its chances of being funded."*
>
> *"Long-standing perception that cheaper research or heavy in-kind contributions are expected by funders."*
>
> *"Individual PIs/Departments/Schools who consider themselves as the exception who should be allowed to work outside of norms. See this through their own lens not that of the institution."*
>
> *"Academics challenging institutional overheads (why are we so expensive?)."*

1.2 **Funders and institutions should improve communication with academic communities about the real cost of research, including the role of agreed costing methods such as TRAC.** Better shared understanding would support stronger institutional decision-making, reduce challenges to legitimate costs and help researchers design projects that are both ambitious and deliverable.

> *"Messaging targeted at academic communities that support the research office position / maintains financial sustainability."*
>
> *"[Funders can] Make it clear to academic audiences that value for money will include an assessment of appropriate recovery to ensure institutional support."*
>
> *"Lack of quality feedback from funders facilitates poor quality of submissions being resubmitted all the time driving quantity increase, not the quality."*
>
> *"Funder feedback, or rather the lack of it, creates an environment which doesn't help with transparency and sustainability. It instead leads to myths of value for money being the biggest driver for success."*

2. Strengthen engagement between funders and research management professionals

2.1 **Funders, institutions and sector bodies should develop more consistent channels for engagement on the design, operation and review of funding schemes.** Engagement should include research management, research finance and post-award professionals, as well as academic and senior leadership perspectives. This would help ensure that funding processes are workable, proportionate and better aligned with institutional delivery realities.

> *"[need] Common messages on sustainable research from across funders, research institutions and professionals."*

2.2 **Funders and institutions should explore practical mechanisms for co-creation and knowledge exchange, including stakeholder groups, cross-sector workshops and short placements or exchanges.** These mechanisms would build mutual understanding, improve scheme design and reduce the risk that well-intentioned policies create avoidable burden or delivery challenges.

> *"[we need] More funder stakeholder groups involving not just academics but also professional support - these are always very welcome and useful."*
>
> *"When seeking feedback, ask for feedback from multiple layers, not just PVC level."*
>
> *"[We are] Lacking channels for engagement. A lot of one way talking to universities. It's improving but slowly."*

> *"More engagement and co-creation with a range of universities, specifically with professional services staff. An example: the first UKRI Proof of Concept call was really problematic, and engagement with research professionals beforehand could have avoided some of the pitfalls."*
>
> *"Exchange/placement programme between funders and professional services/research support staff in universities for knowledge exchange, sharing best practice, co-creation, etc."*

Participants also highlighted examples of effective engagement:

- DSIT bureaucracy network
- ARMA and UUK events
- UKRI Funding Policy team engagement [but noting this was not considered equitable across the sector with a feeling that smaller institutions are often left out of conversations. UKRI key contacts often only engage with PVC, not those trying to juggle demands of sustainable research and culture at the front line]
- Engagement with mission groups (e.g. REF team engagement)

ARMA commitments and next steps

The workshops identified a strong appetite for ARMA to take a more active role in supporting evidence-based discussion on research sustainability and representing the perspectives of research management professionals. In response to the findings of this work, ARMA will use the report to inform its influencing activities, engagement with funders and development of member resources. Subject to governance approval and available resources, ARMA commits to the following next steps:

1. **Create a route for sustained funder engagement.** ARMA will use the findings of this report to structure ongoing engagement with Research England, UKRI and other funders on funding policy and operational delivery, including the specific post-award and administrative burdens identified by members.

> *"hear what issues other institutions experience and how similar they are."*
>
> *"Share ideas of what we are planning to do in a strategic space and get some quick advice and insights from colleagues who have undertaken similar pieces of work in the past."*
>
> *"Cross institutional training and language sharing. Can BUFDG/ARMA hold so it's not seen as "admin."*
>
> *"Upskilling required to support greater variety of funders and opportunities (diversify income streams)."*

2. **Explore closer collaboration with BUFDG and other sector bodies.** ARMA will explore joint activity with BUFDG and relevant sector organisations, including shared events, guidance and communities of practice, to improve understanding between research management and finance professionals and promote consistent messages on sustainable research.

3. **Develop resources and training to improve research financial literacy across academic, professional services and senior leadership audiences.** ARMA will broaden its financial sustainability training so that it goes beyond costing processes and addresses the strategic, cultural and operational dimensions of sustainable research. Common resources on full economic costing, income versus recovery, funder models and sustainable decision-making would reduce duplication across institutions and provide a shared foundation that members could adapt locally.

   Workshop 1 spoke in detail of the challenges in engaging HEI finance teams and academics in this topic. There is rising interest given the financial pressures but limited understanding of the details and often misuse of terms leading to confusion in senior leaders and governance groups.

   "Different understandings of income vs recovery and different funder fEC."

   "Training on fEC? It seems that we've all learnt from internal colleagues, self-learning (or osmosis). Could we have a "one point of truth" official training session?."

   "Develop some financial literacy courses to deliver to ADRIs, Deans, Directors of Centres."

   "Roles are expanding in expecting support staff to be able to support Academics in translating financial complexities around cost recovery to project and grant language."

4. **Establish a stronger professional voice for research finance and post-award delivery.** ARMA will explore options for creating evidence, identify emerging issues and inform ARMA's policy positions and external engagement. Clearer recognition would support skills development, career pathways and the resilience of this critical function.

   "Noting that drive to increase commercial income more is a different set of skills to grant management. Are Ros [research offices] prepared for different way of working?."

About ARMA

ARMA is the UK's professional association for research managers and administrators. ARMA has been at the forefront of supporting research excellence, promoting best practices, and fostering collaboration among academia, research institutions, and funding bodies for over 30 years. Our vision is to drive the professional recognition of research management, to influence the development of UK research policy and to support a vibrant and inclusive community of RMA professionals. Our association consists of a diverse membership comprising c3800 research managers, administrators, and professionals from various disciplines, including universities, research institutes and other research-focused organisations.

ARMA has been undertaking work on financial sustainability since July 2024, establishing a Task & Finish group of volunteers. The aims of the group were to

- **Develop the evidence base** on the impact of financial pressures on UK research, prioritising evidence gathering where other organisations are less well placed
- **Promote dialogue** on this topic with funders and members
- **Enhance ARMA training resources on financial awareness** and strategy development. This recognises that financial literacy is a challenge and the sector needs a broader awareness of the complexity of research finances to respond effectively

Prior to the workshops, the group conducted two member surveys (August 2024, March 2025) and held two discussion sessions at ARMA's Research Leaders Forum (formerly known as Directors Forum). Our members were generous with feedback which adds colour and context on the impacts to researchers and research support teams. Findings from this stage of the work were shared with Government, funders and published by ARMA through the ARMA blog. They also fed into a joint report with CASE and UUK published summer 2025.

Group members

- Bryony Butland – (Chair) Director of Research and Innovation, Queen Mary University London
- Dr Rebecca Edwards – Interim Deputy Director of RKE, Research and Knowledge Exchange Directorate, SOAS University of London
- Dr Camelia Dijkstra – Director, Research and Knowledge Exchange Services, Leeds Beckett University
- Clare Edwards – Head of Research and Partnership Development, University of Leicester
- Dr Angus Bell – Head of Research Development, Brunel University
- Charles Shannon – Head of Research and Innovation Operations, Loughborough University
- Alex Morrison – Research Grants Programme Manager, Bournemouth University

uk arma

Association of Research Managers and Administrators

Further information

enquiries@arma.ac.uk
www.arma.ac.uk