

The Ministry of Defence: Enhanced Defence Academic Engagement

Open future opportunity – This means that a procurement idea is currently active, it is in the early stage of development and judging interest from potential suppliers.

Contract summary

Industry

Defence

Location of contract

Any UK region

Published date

15th April 2024

Closing date

12th May 2024

Contract is suitable for SMEs?

No

Contract is suitable for VCSEs?

Yes

Description

This Request for Information (RFI) invites interested parties to read and provide feedback for the Ministry of Defence's (MOD) planned enhanced academic engagement implementation options.

The objectives of this Request for Information are for MOD to:

- Signal intent and share information to interested parties on a new MOD aspiration to implement an ambitious and strategic transformation for the MOD relationship with academia.
- Understand the capacity and appetite of the market to collaborate with MOD to deliver enhanced academic engagement.
- Obtain views and feedback from stakeholders on indicative options through responses to the questions detailed in the [survey](#) and their effectiveness in meeting MOD's aspiration.
- Use the feedback and information to inform the development of MOD's future procurement strategy and delivery model.

Vision

The MOD aspiration for enhanced engagement between MOD and UK academia is ambitious, aiming to move beyond a purely transactional approach. MOD is looking for academia, in concert with the UK S&T (Science and Technology) ecosystem, to ambitiously

demonstrate the best that could be achieved. Through an enhanced approach MOD aims for game-changing increases in momentum, breadth and presence of engagement with academia, to deliver the best S&T solutions for defence and security, and address current and future skills needs. Such an approach would fold into MOD's S&T group category management programme and could actively improve the transition of research and skills into the industry base, amongst many other benefits. Ultimately the approach may become largely self-sustaining.

Overview of the Requirement

The MOD seeks to establish enhanced engagement between MOD and UK academia through its primary interfaces, the Defence Science and Technology (DST) directorate and the Defence Science and Technology Laboratory (Dstl)

- DST works under the direction of MOD's Chief Scientific Adviser (CSA) to maximise the impact of S&T for the defence and security of the UK. DST sets overall direction for S&T, shapes policy to maximise its impact, and sets priorities for international, cross-government and academic engagement, and manages the interface with all S&T customers. DST commissions MOD's core research programme, which is delivered by Dstl.
- Dstl supplies specialist services to MOD and wider government, working collaboratively with external partners in industry and academia worldwide, providing expert research, specialist advice and invaluable operational support. Dstl implements the delivery of MOD's S&T portfolio to the policy, strategy and direction of DST.

Previous consultation and the University-Friendly Defence Research (UniFyD) Working Group has highlighted the disparate academic engagement landscape within MOD, noting the numerous entry points into MOD that create confusion for academia when prioritising funding opportunities. Feedback from relevant communities also suggests MOD's approach to collaboration and engagement does not consider the needs or ways of working of academia, nor does it make use of the full extent of talent in the UK.

As indicated in the Defence Command Paper (Refresh), building upon MOD's S&T Strategy and the Defence and Security Industrial Strategy (DSIS), successfully leveraging the capability of UK academia is key to maximising the defence and security opportunities inherent in emerging and disruptive S&T, and the generation-after-next capabilities they can lead to. To realise the benefits of working in partnership with academia, in commitment to MOD's [S&T Strategy](#) and [Collaboration and Engagement Strategy](#), an ambitious, enhanced and purposeful relationship is therefore sought with institutions throughout the UK. The purpose of the relationship is to drive:

- Impactful delivery of Defence-relevant S&T capability to create a competitive and capability edge for Defence and dual-use sectors, at a national, regional and local scale.
- Better access for MOD to the most innovative advances and brightest minds from UK academia to maximise the impact of S&T.

The strategic purpose of the enhanced relationship will be realised through the following outcomes:

- Greater visibility for academia of Defence challenges, with academia holistically involved in more of MOD's S&T business, for example through red teaming, acting as a challenge function for key S&T products, or working together with MOD and Defence sector scientists in co-creation spaces.
- Diversity of thought and convergence of ideas to generate innovative new solutions for MOD that can be identified earlier.
- Exchange of knowledge, skills and experience between UK academia, industry and MOD to achieve an overall uplift in UK capability.
- Accessing new academic institutions and organisations to maximise diversity of thought and impact, with opportunities for further investment and collaboration.
- A stable and long-term collaboration for the Defence sector, with talent emerging through the academic training pipeline, spanning degree apprenticeships through to postdoctoral research experience.
- More routine secondment, both long and short-term, of external researchers into MOD or placing MOD researchers into academia/industry to improve understanding and better connect the different environments in which research is undertaken.
- A responsive, flexible and agile research tasking mechanism for MOD to seek short-notice advice and other support from the best academics across the UK.

Implementation options

MOD wishes to pursue an approach that promotes partnering, cohesion and targeted investment. This is likely to favour a hub-based model rather than strategic partnering with single institutions. Institutions coordinating hubs will need to be legal entities (to be able to be in receipt of a MOD contract) and are likely to demonstrate some or all of the following:

- A strong track record of collaboration, both regionally and nationally.
- A track record or strategy for working with the Defence sector.
- Strengths in MOD's research challenges.
- The ability to harness the knowledge and learning within established research training centres such as Centres of Doctoral Training (CDT) and grant funded research, existing Defence-related hubs and centres of excellence, and other Government initiatives such as Catapults and Knowledge Transfer Networks.
- An existing strategy or involvement for developing the needs of the local region, including skills for driving prosperity and productivity.

Four delivery models for enhanced academic engagement are currently being considered, involving a single or network of Lead Institutions. Lead Institutions are organisations that are awarded a contract to manage and coordinate a range of activities, which may include advice, research and/or training/skills development. The different models may have different implications in terms of the distribution and operation of the models in a national, regional and local context. The success of any of the models will be highly dependent on the Lead Institution. This is a key role and needs to be considered along with other aspects of the proposed model.

1. **A Centralised Hub** - One Lead Institution would act as a single point of contact for MOD and is in a contractual relationship with MOD to execute the management activities of the Hub. This Lead Institution would manage, administer and integrate the Defence-related activities. The organisation would coordinate the activities across a range of technical areas and a range of academic (research and training) institutions across the UK. In this model the Lead Institution may not necessarily be an academic institution.

2. **Thematic Hubs** - A network of Lead Institutions that coordinate Defence-related activities with academic institutions across the UK, based on research themes. Each Lead Institution is in a legal contractual relationship with MOD to coordinate the activities within a defined thematic scope. Synergies are created due to the extensive network of academic institutions targeted by each Lead Institution. Contracts for Lead Institutions are awarded on capability within their thematic area, in addition to other criteria. Specific areas of skills and research interest will be detailed at a later stage.
3. **Regional Hubs** - A network of Lead Institutions identified on a regional basis and thus forming a set of regional hubs. The regions could be based on International Territorial Level 1 for the UK, although these could be combined to reduce the number of hubs required. Other alternative approaches to classifying regions could also be considered. The institute coordinating each hub would be expected to demonstrate a strong track record of collaboration, both regionally and nationally, to be inclusive of academic institutes that have not previously engaged with MOD (especially when considering research and skills development). In this model, thematic elements could span regions with appropriate governance and collaboration between Lead Institutions.
4. **Hybrid or other alternative approaches** – MOD would like feedback from academia and interested parties on whether there is a better alternative to options 1, 2 or 3. For example, a hybrid approach allowing the market to determine a best mix of thematic and regional hubs? Or, hubs separately dedicated to research and advice, and to training/skills development? Or, something else? Any alternative approach to enhanced academic engagement should be capable and aspire to deliver the ambitious outcomes that MOD is seeking.

Common factors under each option, MOD has the following guidelines:

- **Route to Market** – Lead Institutions will be appointed by competition and enter a legal contractual relationship with MOD. The contract will be awarded based upon evidence against criteria that may include evidence of partnering and collaboration as listed above, and other factors.
- **Co-funding approach** – MOD encourages that Lead Institutions would be co-funded by academic institutions, industry and/or other research or skills development funding partners. The Lead Institution would seek co-funding to match fund MOD's contribution. This provides an opportunity for industry and funding partners to create resilient and long-lasting relationships with MOD and academia.
- **Intellectual Property Rights (IPR)** – As part of any MOD-funded research, rights must be granted for MOD to use the deliverables and IP, in confidence, for any crown use, MOD national procurement and international collaboration. This must also apply where a Lead Institution is co-funded by industry or research partners.
- **Governance** – MOD does not intend to outsource the responsibility of governance. The relationship will be led and governed by a small committee, chaired by MOD with membership across key Defence stakeholders, co-funders (if necessary) and academia (from Lead Institutions).
- **Payment** – Payment of undisputed and valid invoices for Lead Institutions will be paid in arrears within 30 days after invoices have been agreed and settled, and once deliverables have been achieved.

- **Levelling Up** – there is a requirement for Lead Institutions to support the DSIS' commitment to levelling up across the UK. As such, wherever possible, Lead Institutions are required to ensure that the universities they partner with are spread across the UK.
- **Security** – National security guidelines, policies and legislation need to be considered and adhered to. Additional specific security requirements will be dependent on the collaboration option chosen and will be detailed at a later stage.

Request for information

MOD invites a diverse range of stakeholders and interested parties (not just academics and academic institutions) to please complete the below survey and provide information. MOD is particularly inviting responses from individuals/departments at organisations who may fulfil key roles in enhanced Defence academic engagement, including academic/faculty, commercial and business development staff. MOD may seek to clarify and discuss further any responses in order to support our understanding and inform the future steps. To access the survey, please click [here](#). The survey is open from 15th April and will close at 23:59 on 12th May 2024.

Questions and Answers

1. **Does this replace the Defence Scientific Expert Committee (DSEC) or Independent Science and Technology Advice (ISTA)?**

A: No, DSEC and ISTA specifically provides independent advice to MOD. The intended relationship model serves S&T delivery and skills priorities.

2. **How might this affect existing activities and contracts between MOD and academia (PhDs, CDTs, Centres of Excellence, etc.)?**

A: These will be unaffected but would preferably be recognised under the new relationship model, as MOD seeks to consolidate the identity and presence of MOD working with academia to improve outcomes for MOD in the highly competitive talent market. Experience and outputs from existing activities will inform future activities under the new model, whilst the model seeks to retain flexible and agile access to the best.

3. **How might this affect the new MOD-funded CDTs?**

A: These will be unaffected, contributing to the intent of the new relationship model as for Q2.

4. **How does this relate to Category Management?**

A: Category Management is a complementary programme of activity and is currently undertaking a period of market engagement through a similar RFI process. Responses received from both RFIs will be used to shape our future engagement with academic institutions and wider ways of working with research and development supply chains.

5. How might this affect future co-funding and support from MOD to UKRI competitions (e.g., CDTs, Hubs, IKCs, ...)?

A: MOD will continue to seek appropriate and ambitious opportunities to co-fund activities with UKRI, industry and others – the full palette of current and future schemes, as well as bespoke approaches remains relevant, being selectable to suit needs on a case-by-case basis.

6. Will MOD still retain the option to separately compete and contract some activities with the best available academic supplier and researcher (as now)?

A: MOD intends to retain this flexibility. Whilst, over time and ideally, for many MOD needs the new relationship approach would provide the most appropriate route to market, where academia is the appropriate supplier.

7. Our organisation is a business that solely provides programme / project management and is capable of managing engagements with Academia - is this of interest?

A: Not at this stage; this RFI questionnaire is focused on feedback directly from academic institutions, and other sponsors and exploiters of academic research and training.

8. Could a non-academic institution (e.g. an industry organisation, VCSE or arm's length government body) be a Lead Institution?

A: Possibly, although perhaps most relevant for option 1 (the centralised hub model). MOD has multiple routes to engage across the S&T ecosystem, in this case MOD is seeking to enhance its direct relationship with and outcomes from working with academia. MOD is definitely interested in achieving this together with other key actors in the ecosystem, like industry, VCSEs and wider government.

9. Is a response required to this RFI questionnaire in order to be selected for any future procurement activity?

A: No - this stage is for the purpose of obtaining information to support MOD's understanding of what could be available from the market and to support business case and procurement strategy planning. This is not a call for competition. Should a future procurement result from this RFI, it will be run through a fair and open competition in accordance with the appropriate Procurement Legislation.

10. How relevant is this to small, medium enterprises (SMEs) and is MOD interested in views from this sector of the market?

A: MOD is interested in the views of SMEs. Whilst they cannot lead and deliver this requirement, MOD recognises their important role in the S&T and Research and Development (R&D) ecosystem. In practice, it is anticipated that such enterprises will contribute through the networks of academic institutions.

11. What could be the role of VCSEs?

A: Academic institutions are typically themselves charitable organisations. MOD is also open to insights for the role of other VCSEs in collaborating in this ambitious vision for enhanced Defence academic engagement.