Getting Results

Universities UK

Universities and the UK's economic recovery: an analysis of future impact

#GettingResults

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Summary

This report provides a forecast of the impact of UK universities over the next five years. It is based on historic data, and the changing economic and policy environment means that the actual impact could differ. The methodology section provides further information and data sources.

Support for universities means support for businesses and jobs, for key workers, and for levelling up the UK's towns and regions:

- UK universities will provide over **£11.6 billion** of support and services to small enterprises, businesses and not-for-profits over the next five years. This includes specialist advice, access to the latest facilities and equipment to develop innovative products, and conducting bespoke research projects.
- **79%** of employers with more than 25 staff anticipate a need for upskilling in the next 12 months. In response, universities in Northern Ireland will deliver the equivalent of **410 years** of professional development training and education courses to businesses and charities in the next five years (and 90 years' worth in the next 12 months). Scottish universities will provide **3,490 years** of training by May 2026 (over 600 years' worth in the next year), and Welsh universities will deliver the equivalent of nearly **4,800 years** of upskilling in the next five years (over 880 years' worth in the next 12 months). In England, universities will provide the equivalent of over **549 centuries** (54,936 years) of training by May 2026, and 10,580 years' worth in the next year alone.
- Universities will attract **£21.7 billion** of national and international public funds to spend on collaborative research with businesses and non-academic organisations over the next five years.
- By May 2026, more than **191,000 nurses**, **84,000 medical specialists** and **188,000 teachers** will graduate from UK universities.
- Universities have a track record of attracting funding for local regeneration projects with significant economic and social impact. Over the next five years, these will have a value of over **£2.5 billion** in local places across the UK. Of this total, universities in Wales will be involved in projects worth more than **£536 million**.

- Over the next five years, universities in Scotland are forecast to form over **1,000** new companies and charities, and universities in Wales over **1,500**. In Northern Ireland nearly **150** new companies and charities will be created, and there will be over **19,000** in England. These include university spin-offs, social enterprises, and graduate and staff start-ups.
- Universities have a direct impact on their local economies as large employers. Between 2015 and 2020 employment at universities rose by **3.5%**. A similar rate of growth over the following five years would see **14,628 new jobs** created.
- Estimates suggest that **1.27%** of all people in employment in the UK work for a university. In Scotland, **nearly 1 in 50** people in work are employed by a university.

Introduction

Universities are open for business. In partnership with employers, colleges, the NHS, and the cultural and voluntary sectors, universities are ready to accelerate the economic and social recovery from the pandemic and increase opportunities across the UK. Through innovation, training and knowledge exchange, universities will drive productivity and boost competitiveness. By producing skilled graduates and delivering local regeneration projects, universities will work to level up the UK and improve lives.

Universities have a unique convening power. They attract national and international funding and translate it into local impact. They have a history of collaboration, of forging new partnerships across the world and sharing new discoveries for public benefit. But the economic aftershock of the Covid-19 pandemic has hit communities hard. This makes the levelling up agenda more challenging, but even more vital. As we look to rebuild the economy and address long-standing structural issues facing our society – from health inequalities to the climate emergency – the UK's universities need to be at the forefront of the response.

This report illustrates the potential impact of universities over the next five years. There are limitations to the methods used in calculating these forecasts, but the figures show what is possible. Indeed, in many cases the figures could represent significant under-estimates, given lower data returns during the pandemic and changes around, for example, the cap on medical school places.

However, maximising the contribution of universities to the recovery means taking action. With a renewed commitment from higher education institutions to collaboration with new and existing partners, the economic and social recovery from the pandemic can be faster and stronger. World-class innovation and research assets need support. Training highly skilled people requires investment. Ensuring the benefits of both of these are felt equally around the UK will depend on robust policy and funding decisions. But, as this report shows, the possibilities from a well-supported university sector are tremendously exciting.

Recommendations

1. **The UK government** should support university collaborations in skills training, business support, and research and innovation with existing and new partners across the private and public sector. These vital partnerships need to be underpinned by dedicated funding, and encouraged in programmes such as the UK Shared Prosperity Fund and Levelling Up Fund.

2. **UK Research and Innovation (UKRI)** should take the lead in efforts to improve and maintain funding to rebalance regional research and innovation funding through the forthcoming place-based research and development strategy, and by strengthening initiatives such as the Strength in Places fund. Historic underfunding in some regions has led to inequalities in economic performance across the UK.

3. **Universities** should make themselves available for new partnerships and seek novel ways of engaging with potential partners so they can develop even stronger collaborations and have greater impact locally and nationally. University impact is felt in many ways: for example, universities should look for opportunities to focus even more of their spending within the local economy. The considerable expenditure on staff has significant local benefits, and maximising local procurement can have similar impact.

4. **Local and Combined Authorities** should bring universities into economic and social planning to ensure a wide-reaching and long-lasting recovery. Partnering on, for example, enterprise incubators and start-up support can boost local job creation, and working together on innovation programmes increases Small and Medium-sized Enterprise (SME) competitiveness.

1. Supporting people

From providing a pipeline of key workers to upskilling for new jobs

Over the next five years, more than **191,000 nurses**, **84,000 medical specialists** and **188,000 teachers** will graduate from UK universities.

Table 1: Projection of the number of key workers who will be trained by UK universities over the next five years

	Nurses	Medics	Teachers
East Midlands	13,775	5,125	12,325
East of England	14,050	3,050	6,500
London	22,400	27,775	24,450
North East	10,975	3,775	7,950
North West	29,700	7,850	27,150
Northern Ireland	**6,800**	**2,150**	**3,400**
Scotland	**21,175**	**9,650**	**22,525**
South East	18,775	6,100	26,150
South West	11,900	3,350	13,150
Wales	**10,500**	**4,250**	**8,000**
West Midlands	16,900	5,650	18,825
Yorkshire & the Humber	14,250	5,850	18,150
England	**152,725**	**68,525**	**154,650**

Record numbers of people applied to become doctors in 2020, five new medical schools have opened in underrepresented parts of the country in recent years, and the number of people starting initial teacher training courses in England alone rose by **23%** this year. Other professions, such as engineering, have also seen strong increases.[1]

Studies show doctors tend to stay in the region after their training.[2] Universities in Yorkshire and the Humber are currently training over **4,500** medics, and universities in Scotland are training over **7,100** medics. The East of England is training nearly **10,000** nurses; the West Midlands is training over **13,100** nurses. Wales currently has **2,750** teachers in the pipeline; Northern Ireland is training over **1,600** teachers.[3]

Universities will also meet the skills needs of the broader economy. Demand for higher level skills is projected to continue rising into the late 2020s.[4] More immediately, **four fifths** of employers with more than 25 staff anticipate a need for upskilling in the next 12 months. This rises to **84%** for firms with over 100 staff. In no region does the need for upskilling fall below 60%.

Table 2: Percentage of employers who anticipate a need for upskilling in the next 12 months

East Midlands	60%
East of England	62%
London	67%
North East	61%
North West	64%
Northern Ireland	**63%**
South East	67%
South West	64%
Wales	**68%**
West Midlands	64%
Yorkshire and the Humber	66%
England	**64%**

(No survey data is available for Scotland)

In addition to educating students, universities are responding to this need with training and upskilling programmes tailored to employers and the community. By May 2026, universities in Northern Ireland will have delivered the equivalent of 410 years of professional development training and education courses to businesses and charities. Scottish universities will provide 3,490 years of training, and Welsh universities will deliver the equivalent of nearly 4,800 years' worth. In England, universities will provide the equivalent of 10,580 years of upskilling in the next year alone, and over 549 centuries' (54,936 years) worth by May 2026.

Table 3: Forecast of the number of days universities will provide training and upskilling to businesses and the community of the next five years

	1 year	18 months	2 years	5 years
East Midlands	227,895	344,881	467,910	1,260,774
East of England	573,742	867,972	1,176,839	3,162,505
London	951,277	1,416,519	1,861,085	4,341,355
North East	126,610	182,000	221,648	317,071
North West	812,027	1,236,754	1,698,703	4,807,232
Northern Ireland	**33,109**	**49,265**	**64,629**	**149,638**
Scotland	**219,486**	**333,644**	**456,586**	**1,273,714**
South East	592,685	895,770	1,212,267	3,232,620
South West	129,293	195,201	263,618	696,823
Wales	**321,617**	**485,996**	**657,476**	**1,750,617**
West Midlands	237,426	349,637	448,915	927,547
Yorkshire & the Humber	211,100	322,919	447,205	1,305,756
England	**3,862,055**	**5,811,653**	**7,798,189**	**20,051,683**

2. Partnering with business

From advice and training to making cutting-edge research accessible

Universities provide a range of support to business. For example, all universities in the East Midlands have both an enquiry point for small businesses and a service to help enterprises understand their needs. In the North East, all universities offer bespoke courses for business on campus or at business premises.

Table 4: The percentage of universities providing specific forms of support to businesses

	An enquiry point for SMEs	Assistance to SMEs in specifying their needs	Continuous work-based learning	Short bespoke courses for business on campus	Short bespoke courses at business premises	Extra-mural courses for the public	Distance learning (online course content)
East Midlands	100%	100%	100%	89%	100%	89%	100%
East of England	90%	90%	90%	100%	80%	80%	80%
London	79%	74%	58%	92%	74%	74%	76%
North East	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
North West	93%	93%	67%	93%	87%	73%	87%
Northern Ireland	**50%**	**50%**	**50%**	**50%**	**50%**	**75%**	**75%**
Scotland	**94%**	**94%**	**61%**	**100%**	**78%**	**67%**	**94%**
South East	89%	74%	79%	95%	84%	74%	95%
South West	93%	87%	80%	93%	87%	80%	80%
Wales	**100%**	**100%**	**75%**	**100%**	**88%**	**100%**	**100%**
West Midlands	100%	92%	100%	100%	100%	75%	100%
Yorkshire & the Humber	92%	75%	75%	92%	92%	92%	75%
England	**90%**	**83%**	**76%**	**94%**	**85%**	**79%**	**85%**

Over the next five years, UK universities will be commissioned to provide over **£11.6 billion** of support and services to small enterprises, businesses and not-for-profits. Universities in the South West will provide over **£472 million** of support. Universities in London will provide over **£2 billion**, and universities in the South East nearly **£2.4 billion** of services. This includes specialist advice, access to the latest facilities and equipment to develop innovative products, and conducting bespoke research projects.

Table 5: The forecast value of services provided by universities to SMEs, businesses and not-for-profits over the next five years

	1 year	18 months	2 years	5 years
East Midlands	£157,209,385	£237,965,519	£323,001,022	£871,939,990
East of England	£121,405,609	£181,293,550	£239,560,669	£574,495,837
London	£416,240,731	£624,256,178	£832,062,935	£2,077,014,939
North East	£56,193,279	£84,047,343	£111,418,907	£271,281,930
North West	£211,968,323	£319,846,280	£431,491,130	£1,135,448,541
Northern Ireland	**£65,221,197**	**£98,936,793**	**£134,850,309**	**£370,221,356**
Scotland	**£239,463,304**	**£360,976,340**	**£486,032,674**	**£1,268,435,587**
South East	£440,692,029	£665,809,958	£900,419,562	£2,393,971,646
South West	£94,522,930	£141,785,324	£189,049,567	£472,651,754
Wales	**£44,626,552**	**£67,320,620**	**£90,772,108**	**£238,335,285**
West Midlands	£148,420,461	£223,259,801	£299,350,485	£767,218,563
Yorkshire & the Humber	£231,794,075	£349,759,985	£471,841,029	£1,241,566,990
England	**£1,878,446,822**	**£2,828,023,938**	**£3,798,195,306**	**£9,805,590,189**

In addition to these activities, universities attract national and international public funds to spend on collaborative research with businesses and non-academic organisations, expected to be worth **£21.7 billion** in the UK over the next five years. The value of this research in the North East is forecast to reach nearly **£1 billion** over the next five years. In both Yorkshire and the Humber and the West Midlands the value is over **£1.9 billion**, and in the North West the value is nearly **£2.7 billion**.

Table 6: The forecast value of research between universities and non-academic partners, involving public funding, over the next five years

	1 year	18 months	2 years	5 years
East Midlands	£213,134,025	£321,658,184	£434,075,249	£1,143,806,292
East of England	£152,952,192	£232,816,545	£319,420,384	£900,032,049
London	£847,162,140	£1,286,372,112	£1,756,669,079	£4,859,771,122
North East	£182,797,926	£276,340,847	£374,148,252	£999,583,924
North West	£469,317,885	£712,777,473	£973,742,170	£2,697,941,970
Northern Ireland	**£104,522,005**	**£158,309,830**	**£215,134,611**	**£583,566,087**
Scotland	**£579,091,847**	**£880,951,464**	**£1,207,303,893**	**£3,387,064,961**
South East	£221,318,786	£331,577,735	£441,040,173	£1,090,606,802
South West	£258,023,751	£393,244,891	£540,816,701	£1,538,014,336
Wales	**£132,956,047**	**£199,574,604**	**£266,472,693**	**£670,390,841**
West Midlands	£328,722,923	£500,842,482	£688,393,447	£1,953,344,980
Yorkshire & the Humber	£344,983,600	£523,064,220	£712,261,400	£1,948,043,240
England	**£3,018,413,227**	**£4,578,694,489**	**£6,240,566,855**	**£17,131,144,716**

This research translates into impact in priority sectors. Research organisations have been awarded over **£5.3 billion** of competitive funding from Innovate UK since 2014. This funding has a focus on collaboration with business, and showcases areas of regional research and industry strength. **Over a third** of funding received by research organisations in the East Midlands was for clean growth and infrastructure projects with businesses, a higher proportion than any other region. In Yorkshire **85%** of funding has been for manufacturing, materials and mobility projects, and **53%** of funding in London has been in the area of ageing, health and nutrition – both higher than their counterparts across the UK.

Universities in all nations and regions conduct cutting-edge research. However, there are regional disparities in research and innovation investment, with historic underfunding in some regions leading to inequalities in economic performance across the UK, threatening the levelling up agenda.[5]
As such, research and innovation policy needs to be designed alongside, and be closely aligned to, local economic development policy.

Table 7: Competitive funding awarded to research organisations by Innovate UK in thematic areas 2004-2021

	Ageing Society, Health & Nutrition	AI & Data Economy	Clean Growth & Infrastructure	Manufacturing, Materials & Mobility	Total
East Midlands	£20,230,560.00	£5,348,492.00	£68,344,636.00	£93,847,294.98	£187,770,982.98
East of England	£25,843,056.00	£7,031,658.00	£34,087,624.60	£96,930,954.05	£163,893,292.65
London	£441,389,361.97	£158,663,031.00	£125,422,835.19	£102,006,232.00	£827,481,460.16
North East	£122,960,132.00	£1,601,739.00	£204,987,357.60	£332,878,721.52	£662,427,950.12
North West	£27,337,339.80	£6,627,253.00	£10,336,618.41	£36,436,202.00	£80,737,413.21
Northern Ireland	**£9,514,462.00**	**£3,894,875.00**	**£633,772.00**	**£16,263,445.38**	**£30,306,554.38**
Scotland	**£42,393,164.80**	**£8,267,937.00**	**£103,397,096.87**	**£187,216,761.40**	**£341,274,960.07**
South East	£39,264,390.00	£174,335,933.10	£157,060,056.90	£178,813,047.59	£549,473,427.59
South West	£109,227,930.00	£10,020,339.00	£60,001,476.20	£267,336,562.37	£446,586,307.57
Wales	**£9,362,546.20**	**£1,826,732.00**	**£11,034,234.00**	**£80,692,236.01**	**£102,915,748.21**
West Midlands	£17,088,423.00	£6,224,846.44	£147,798,249.99	£723,904,892.15	£895,016,411.58
Yorkshire & the Humber	£24,003,532.00	£6,488,267.00	£27,353,484.70	£342,559,561.00	£400,404,844.70
England	**£827,344,724.77**	**£376,341,558.54**	**£835,392,339.59**	**£2,174,713,467.66**	**£4,213,792,090.56**

Universities themselves also create new companies, in turn creating new jobs. Over the next five years, universities in Scotland are forecast to form over **1,000** new companies and charities, and universities in Wales over **1,500**. In the West Midlands over **1,300** new companies and charities will be created, and there will be over **2,500** in the North West. These include university spin-offs, social enterprises, and graduate and staff start-ups.

Table 8: The forecast number of new companies and charities to be formed because of universities over the next five years

	1 year	18 months	2 years	5 years
East Midlands	444	666	888	2,220
East of England	336	503	671	1,678
London	1,194	1,791	2,388	5,969
North East	145	218	290	725
North West	503	755	1,006	2,515
Northern Ireland	**29**	**43**	**58**	**144**
Scotland	**202**	**303**	**404**	**1,009**
South East	350	526	701	1,752
South West	361	541	722	1,804
Wales	**307**	**461**	**615**	**1,537**
West Midlands	265	398	531	1,327
Yorkshire & the Humber	205	308	411	1,027
England	**3,803**	**5,705**	**7,607**	**19,017**

3. Helping local areas recover

From the regeneration of town centres to boosting employment

Universities have a track record of attracting funding for local regeneration projects with significant economic and social impact. Over the next five years, these will have a value of over **£2.5 billion** in local places across the UK.

Of this total, universities in Wales will be involved in projects worth more than **£536 million**. Universities in the West Midlands will contribute over **£547 million** to local regeneration and development work.

Table 9: The forecast value to the economy of regeneration projects universities are involved in over the next five years

	1 year	18 months	2 years	5 years
East Midlands	£28,770,144	£43,017,808	£56,992,157	£138,364,897
East of England	£11,708,352	£17,331,267	£22,494,186	£49,309,000
London	£24,061,461	£36,827,802	£51,057,326	£149,675,464
North East	£8,500,464	£12,840,894	£17,360,731	£46,103,305
North West	£38,821,715	£58,514,532	£78,768,187	£205,365,398
Northern Ireland	**£25,318,621**	**£38,404,539**	**£52,339,009**	**£143,624,756**
Scotland	**£62,790,686**	**£96,528,893**	**£134,927,225**	**£407,488,783**
South East	£9,038,017	£13,328,443	£17,164,200	£36,064,244
South West	£27,660,527	£41,787,710	£56,505,489	£150,156,728
Wales	**£88,684,583**	**£135,365,234**	**£186,697,050**	**£536,778,426**
West Midlands	£100,362,808	£151,681,109	£205,260,781	£547,202,972
Yorkshire & the Humber	£28,266,533	£42,978,187	£58,840,294	£164,423,906
England	**£277,190,021**	**£418,307,751**	**£564,443,351**	**£1,486,665,914**

Many of these projects will attract additional funds from universities and businesses, on top of public funding from national and international sources, increasing the local impact.

Universities also have a direct impact on their local economies as large employers, and the spending of staff and students – many of whom are attracted from other parts of the country. Students add to the pool of local skills, and some will set up their own firms in the region.

Table 10: The number of students at UK universities (full-time equivalent, 2019/20)

East Midlands	164,380
East of England	120,950
London	333,485
North East	96,010
North West	209,345
Northern Ireland	**41,810**
Scotland	**207,540**
South East	296,145
South West	154,390
Wales	**101,580**
West Midlands	180,720
Yorkshire & the Humber	176,675
England	**1,732,100**

Table 11: The number of staff at UK universities (full-time equivalent, 2019/20)

East Midlands	20,030
East of England	24,140
London	64,690
North East	15,950
North West	36,475
Northern Ireland	**5,495**
Scotland	**41,255**
South East	46,650
South West	25,030
Wales	**17,335**
West Midlands	25,030
Yorkshire & the Humber	28,910
England	**286,905**


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Between 2014-15 and 2019-20 employment at universities rose by **3.5%**, or **14,135** jobs. A similar rate of growth over the following five years would see **14,628** new jobs created.[6] Estimates suggest that **1.27%** of all people in employment in the UK work for a university. In Scotland, **nearly 1 in 50** people in employment are employed by a university.[7]

Table 12: The percentage of people in employment who are employed by a university

East Midlands	1.01%
East of England	0.89%
London	1.65%
North East	1.43%
North West	1.19%
Northern Ireland	**0.68%**
Scotland	**1.92%**
South East	1.23%
South West	1.07%
Wales	**1.38%**
West Midlands	1.09%
Yorkshire & the Humber	1.24%
England	**1.22%**
UK	**1.27%**

Universities in the UK spend nearly **£26 billion** a year on their staff. University employees spend part of their income in the local economy, on goods and services in a range of sectors.

Table 13: University expenditure on staff (2018/19)

East Midlands	£1,543,916,000
East of England	£2,010,132,000
London	£5,274,383,000
North East	£1,003,744,000
North West	£2,319,906,000
Northern Ireland	**£463,952,000**
Scotland	**£2,767,732,000**
South East	£3,856,978,000
South West	£1,621,372,000
Wales	**£1,119,372,000**
West Midlands	£1,895,964,000
Yorkshire & the Humber	£2,073,093,000
England	**£21,599,488,000**

University impact is also felt in local procurement, and maximising this will provide a boost to local economies. For example, the Leeds Anchors Network brings together many of the biggest organisations in the city and is chaired by Leeds Beckett University. The network is looking at opportunities to direct more spending locally: if anchor institutions in Leeds shift 10% of their total spending to suppliers in the region this could be worth up to £196 million each year.[8]

This report has shown the impact possible by supporting universities. These results are underpinned by partnerships with employers, colleges and other organisations. Given the benefits of working together and the scale of the recovery ahead of us, these partnerships need to continue to grow and develop. In doing so universities provide support for businesses and jobs, for key workers, and for levelling up the UK's towns and regions.

Methodology

This report draws on data accessed in April 2021 from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA), UK Research and Innovation (UKRI), and the Office for National Statistics (ONS). Depending on data availability and comparability, up to five years of previous data was analysed. The forecasts are projections based on historic data and are intended to serve as illustrative estimates of potential future impact.

For detail on how forecasts were calculated, limitations and assumptions, and other contextual information, please see the technical note:
github.com/jcransom/future-impact

Sources for data tables

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Credits and endnotes

Research and analysis by James Ransom, Head of Research at the National Centre for Entrepreneurship in Education (NCEE).

[1] https://www.ucas.com/corporate/news-and-key-documents/news/more-people-ever-want-be-doctor;
https://www.hee.nhs.uk/news-blogs-events/news/new-medical-schools-open-train-doctors-future;
https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/initial-teacher-training-census/2020-21;
https://www.theengineer.co.uk/ucas-data-shows-increase-in-engineering-degrees/.

As a result, actual numbers of newly qualified key workers are likely to be considerably higher than this. There are several additional reasons why these projections may be underestimates. First, the government has temporarily lifted the cap on medical school places in England. Second, HESA acknowledge that 'significant numbers' of qualifications awarded this year (upon which projections are based) are likely to have not been reported, because a few providers experienced administrative delays related to the COVID-19 pandemic.

[2] https://bmcmededuc.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s12909-018-1414-9.

[3] Data source: https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students/table-49.

[4] Working Futures 2017-2027: Long-run labour market and skills projections for the UK, page 117. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/863506/Working_Futures_Main_Report.pdf

[5] Recent research published by Nesta argues that some parts of the UK have missed out on £4 billion of public R&D funding each year, plus a further £8 billion of private sector investment. Some of these regions never fully recovered from the 2008 Great Recession, and COVID-19 threatens to deepen these divisions. See: https://www.nesta.org.uk/report/the-missing-4-billion/.

[6] Based on headcount data. From 2019/20, it is not mandatory for HE providers in England and Northern Ireland to return information about non-academic staff, and 66 universities opted-out. This means the increase since 2014/15 is likely considerably higher in reality. Data: https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/staff/table-1.

[7] Up from 1.6% in 2014-15: The economic impact of universities in 2014–15. https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/policy-and-analysis/reports/Documents/2017/the-economic-impact-of-universities.pdf

[8] When multipliers to reflect the circulation of money are factored in. See: https://www.jrf.org.uk/report/maximising-local-impact-anchor-institutions-case-study-leeds-city-region. The JRF have also worked with Leeds City Council to create a useful framework to help organisations capitalise on their role as anchor institutions: https://democracy.leeds.gov.uk/documents/s181576/4%2520%20Anchor%2520Institution%2520Progression%2520Framework%2520Toolkit.%20pdf.
For more on the Leeds Anchors Network, see: http://www.leedsgrowthstrategy.co.uk/anchor-institutions/.

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