



FUNDING FUTURES

The Funding Futures collective is a growing partnership of UK universities dedicated to improving access and inclusion within the Creative Industries funding ecosystems – where universities work as funders and intermediaries of creative research, development and innovation. The collective is focused on making practical design changes to their funding processes and addressing systemic challenges through collaboration with practitioners, Creative Industries’ organisations, research councils and government.

Key messages

The first Funding Futures report¹ presents common challenges to university-led funding programmes and highlights the need for a system-wide approach to making change.

- Application design needs to be addressed as a system.
- Measuring social impact requires tools and timescales that are not yet standard practice but that are urgently needed. Linked to this, coherent and joined-up approaches to data collection, mission and values are required, rather than the fragmented monitoring that currently prevails at every level.
- Structural and time pressures flow through the whole ecosystem to create pressure in application

windows, project cycles and the pace of community building. This disproportionately disadvantages those with the least existing resource, and erodes the trust and continuity that inclusion depends on.

- Leadership and accountability shape whether equity and inclusion work has the legitimacy and resource to take root. Strong leadership on equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) is needed from UKRI and AHRC, universities and partner organisations.
- Community trust is the practical foundation that underpins everything. Without the trust of the community, even the most well-resourced programme will fail to reach the people it intends to serve.

¹ Kurta L, Willingham E, Brown E, Murphy D. Funding Futures: Tackling inequality and exclusion in the distribution of research and development funding in the Creative Industries. Reporting from the symposium held in York on 17 April 2026 [Internet]. XR Stories and Ida XR Studio. 2026. Available from https://xrstories.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2026/06/Funding-Futures-report_April-2026.pdf

Case studies:

- **Creative Informatics (University of Edinburgh):** Developed the Inclusive Capital Funding programme which targeted support across a broad range of marginalised groups. The success of this funding programme at reaching marginalised groups was its commitment to partnerships and building trust with less socio-economically privileged communities.
- **Music Futures (University of Liverpool):** Understood that eligibility criteria can be an access barrier and relaxed traditional eligibility criteria to welcome freelancers and entrepreneurs, widening who can apply to their funding calls.
- **XR Stories (University of York):** Undertook research to understand the barriers that have been experienced by academic and industry practitioners from marginalised groups applying (or considering applying) for research and development funding from their XR Network+ project and other similar programmes. Using Ida XR Studio's equitable design tools, they applied multiple interventions to their XR Network+ grant process, with documented successes ².
- **Ulster University:** Focused on the role of class and socio-economic background, and created spaces in communities where young people and practitioners can upskill.

Existing resources for university programmes responsible for distributing funding

One of the key aims of the collective is to highlight ways university programmes with funding can take action.

- **Ida XR Studio:** Equitable design principles and practical design tools and methods for building more inclusive funding systems from the ground up. Training and tailored support is available at www.idaxrstudio.com
- **Watershed:** An open source "Inclusion Framework for Change" offers an end-to-end process for inclusive design and understanding one's capacity, resources and power to make changes.

What's next

The Funding Futures collective will reconvene in autumn 2026 with a broader set of Creative Industries contributors. The collective will begin to translate themes into shared commitments and targeted actions to remove barriers to access. The group will also start to address systemic challenges, including:

- **The quadruple bottom line:** How can we view EDI work holistically and understand its relationship to financial sustainability, environmental sustainability and workforce health? How can we build holistic strategies and move away from the narrative that we don't have enough time and resources to do EDI work?
- **Impact and Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) and measurement:** How do we build collective KPIs and measurement strategies? Who do we need to influence to have accountability structures which bring about real change and compelling narratives for prosperity?
- **Redistributing power and building trust:** What community leadership and voice strategies are needed for real change to take root? E.g., community boards, citizen's assembly, workplace unions. How can we lead from the grassroots? What is needed to enable this?

Further information

To join the Funding Futures collective, please email enquiries@xrstories.co.uk.

² Neyra R, Palmer S. Designing more inclusive funding calls: Evidence, lessons and future directions [Internet]. XR Stories. 2026. Available from https://xrstories.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2026/04/XR_Stories_EDI-Report_March-2026-DIGITAL.pdf and Neyra R, Harrison J, Brown E, Murphy D. Women in Tech Taskforce: Building a future tech sector that works for everyone [Internet]. XR Stories. 2026. Available from: <https://xrstories.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2026/05/Women-in-Tech-Taskforce-Written-evidence-from-XR-Stories-and-XR-Network.pdf>