

Oct 11, 2023 15:17 BST

New research centre driving economic growth and sustainability

Northumbria University is one of six northern institutions driving a new £5m research initiative to help boost UK economic growth and address regional needs.

The Northern Net Zero Accelerator - Energy Systems Integration for a Decarbonised Economy will make, collate and translate knowledge from research on net zero technologies, policy, energy and industrial systems. The project will deliver impact in partnership with regional industry, civic bodies and the third sector, thereby delivering real change through our community of partners.

The new Accelerator sees Northumbria working in collaboration with the universities of Durham, Hull, Newcastle, Sunderland, and Teesside. Led by Newcastle University's Professor Sara Walker, the Accelerator received £5m investment to boost translation of research into applications and actions through collaboration with civic, industry and third sector partners.

The theme of the Northern Net Zero Accelerator is on Energy Systems Integration for a Decarbonised Economy. Three pillars to the theme have been identified:

- Low Carbon Energy Generation
- Energy Storage and Distribution
- Integration into End Use Sectors

Professor Walker, Professor of Energy at Newcastle University, said: "The Northern Net Zero Accelerator brings together academic, civic, industry and third sector partners across the North East, Teesside and the Humber.

“We have an expert consortium which is ready and ambitious to support decarbonisation of our energy systems. We will do this with stakeholders, in a way which ensures a strong economy, and an improved environment, which is fair, and creates inclusive opportunities.”

[Professor of Electrical Engineering Hamdi Torun](#) is leading Northumbria University’s involvement in the Northern Net Zero Accelerator and said: “This new partnership follows recent collaboration among the academic institutions involved and stakeholders towards an ambitious agenda for delivering economic and social impact aligned with regional growth strategies. We will focus on fostering the emergence of innovative collaborations benefiting the area.”

Northumbria’s [Energy Systems and Materials](#) peak of research excellence aligns seamlessly to the focus and ambition of the Northern Net Zero Accelerator. The University leads the EPSRC Centre for Doctoral Training, [Renewable Energy Northeast Universities \(ReNU\)](#) with Durham and Newcastle Universities as partners, creating a pipeline of skilled doctoral graduates to drive innovation in small scale renewable and sustainable distributed energy.

Professor Neil Beattie, ReNU Director and Professor of Energy Innovation at Northumbria University, said: “This collaboration builds on the successful EPSRC Centre for Doctoral Training in Renewable Energy Northeast Universities which is currently training over 50 high-skill students to power the green economy in the North East of England and beyond.”

UK Innovation clusters

Northern Net Zero Accelerator - Energy Systems Integration for a Decarbonised Economy is part of several new projects that have received £41 million funding to enhance UK research and innovation clusters. These clusters will combine some of the country’s leading engineering and physical sciences research with the ambitions of civic bodies and local business to enhance different regions’ economic capability.

Over the next four years, the new projects will help established research and innovation clusters to expand, and emerging clusters to develop and realise their potential.

The projects are led by consortia spread across the UK and are funded by the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council (EPSRC), which is part of UK Research and Innovation.

Science Minister, George Freeman, said: “The UK is already home to clusters of world-class science and technology talent, bringing together top universities, cutting-edge research institutes and enterprising businesses of all sizes and it is crucial we channel these hubs of scientific advance and growth to level up our country.

“From skilling up South Wales and Central Scotland with hundreds of jobs in semiconductors and photonics, to boosting the North-West of England’s biotechnology sector and trebling the economic return for the region, our £41m investment will help enhance these clusters’ vast potential for the good of our local economies and the wider country.”

Professor Miles Padgett, Interim Executive Chair at EPSRC, added: “I’m pleased to announce our first ten Place Based Impact Acceleration Accounts which will play a unique role in enhancing the capabilities of innovation clusters across the UK.

“A key priority for UKRI is to strengthen clusters and partnerships in collaboration with civic bodies and businesses, thereby driving regional economic growth.”

The EPSRC has awarded the consortia leading the ten projects a total of £41 million through a new scheme called Place Based Impact Acceleration Account (PBIAA). Project partners have committed a further £7.8 million.

The awards provide research organisations with flexible funding enabling them to drive impacts from their research portfolio through a wide range of activities.

Each consortium focuses on a scientific theme in engineering and physical sciences research and targets a specific geographical area to support the expansion or development of a research and innovation cluster.

The projects will bring short- and long-term benefits to regional and local economies and communities including new jobs, skills development, private

investment, growth of SMEs, and more. They also support the government's levelling up agenda creating an opportunity for academics and civic actors to collaborate and support the development of local industry and places.

Projects will commence at the end of 2023 or the start of 2024. Round two of EPSRC's PBIAA scheme will launch late October 2023.

Adapted with thanks from the UKRI.

UNIVERSITY OF THE YEAR 2022 (Times Higher Education Awards)

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