

About Us and Our Mission, an explanation.

The RSA (Royal Society for the encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce) mission is to enrich society through ideas and action. We believe that all human beings have the capacity for creativity that can be mobilised to deliver a better future for all. We call this a 21st century enlightenment.

Our history

The Royal Society for the encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce (RSA) was founded in 1754 as the Society for the encouragement of Arts, Manufacture and Commerce, it was granted a Royal Charter in 1847, and the right to use the term Royal in its name by King Edward VII in 1908.

Our charitable objectives are: *'The encouragement of the Arts Manufactures and Commerce.. .by the advancement of education in and the encouragement and conduct of research into the sustainable context within which the said Arts Manufactures and Commerce may prosper and to make such research findings available to the public'*

The RSA was founded by Williams Shipley, a skilled artist, social reformer and inventor who hoped that the RSA would become a centre for intellectual advancements in the areas of arts and sciences. This was based on the idea of using 'premiums' to support improvements in the liberal arts and sciences, and to stimulate enterprise and innovation for the common good. Premiums were cash prizes, awarded for merit, and from 1756 medals were also awarded. William Shipley also promoted the idea of the role of private organisations to serve the public.

In the 260 years since our foundation we have applied our mission to challenges and causes as diverse as agricultural innovation, public safety and sanitation, the education of girls, vocational skills and environmental conservation and corporate governance. The RSA was the driving force behind the Great Exhibition of 1851, we invented the plaques scheme to mark the birthplace of historical figures, we helped top establish a range of artistic and professional institutions. Our prize winning journal was first published in 1852 and in 1914 members of the RSA became Fellows who could use the FRSA designation. [presumably have a link here to the archive/history section]

Throughout its history the RSA has adapted to the changing climate and new challenges. Through our modern programme of events, research, innovation and Fellowship engagement the RSA continues to create networks and opportunities for people to collaborate and create real world impact and social change.

Our change aims

The RSA has, over its 260 year history, focused on a wide range of issues. Our current focus is on the following key themes:

- Creative Learning & Development
- Economy, Enterprise & Manufacturing
- Public Services & Communities

Creative Learning & Development

“To close the creativity gap: leading an approach to learning & development that enables everyone regardless of background to generate original, valuable ideas and make them happen.”

The RSA has throughout its history been at the forefront of education development realising that the Arts, Manufacturing and Commerce require skilled individuals to flourish.

The RSA becomes the first organisation to offer vocational qualifications on a national basis. These exams are specifically for the benefit of the working class, the education of which was considered fundamental to the nation's economic prosperity. The first exams include Botany, Animal Physiology and Roman History. The exams became the prototype for many later schemes, leading the way for the Oxford and Cambridge 'locals', the Science and Art department examinations and the University of London's public examinations.

The RSA was also a founding contributor to the Royal College of Music ('RCM'). Though music had not been one of the 'arts' originally promoted by the RSA, in the 1870s it began to investigate 'the present state of musical education at home and abroad'. The RSA used foreign musical education as a template and visited musical schools in Paris, Vienna, Milan and Prague. The building of a National Training School for Music (which was subsequently to become the RCM) was begun in 1873 in South Kensington. The RSA offered four scholarships to the new school which opened in 1876 with a total of 67 scholarships funded by various institutions.

Today the growing complexity and unpredictability mean our economy and society demand ever greater creativity from workers and citizens. Differing levels of confidence, inequalities of wealth and varying skills mean not all individuals are equally able to meet this challenge. We call this the 'creativity gap'.

We believe that education systems should be geared more clearly towards equipping people with the power to create. We are convinced that people of every age can learn to develop their creative capacities both as a means to raising attainment and broader outcomes, and as an important end in itself. We seek to close the creativity gap by leading an approach to learning and development that enables everyone, regardless of background, to generate original, valuable ideas and make them happen.

Through our programme of research and innovation, we aim to transform public, professional and political understanding and attitudes, so that families, schools, workplaces and other learning institutions prioritise and generate creative capacities. We do this in conjunction with RSA Academies and its network of academies which are central to our ambitions providing a partnership in which to explore our research. To achieve this we ensure all our programmes relate to one or more of the following outcomes:

- creative learners
- creative educators
- innovative institutions & systems

Economy, Enterprise & Manufacturing

“We bring together businesses, makers and entrepreneurs to understand and promote entrepreneurship, sustainable and innovative manufacturing and to create the next generation of socially responsible designers and enterprises.”

The world’s economy is undergoing enormous change. New technologies, business model and aspirations are making the creativity of organisations, workers and even consumers more central to our future wealth. At the same time our challenges only seem to be growing. Resources are increasingly scarce. Inequality and poverty are an ongoing cause of human misery. And the consequences of rapid technological change are great but unpredictable.

The RSA has historically driven change in the Arts, Manufacturing and Commerce through the provision of public lectures and awards, leading to widespread innovation from the Great Exhibition in 1851, lectures covering vast subjects such as steam, music and architecture and along with awards and prizes in similarly vast areas.

Challenges previously championed by the RSA include a method for clean chimneys without employing children whose inventor, George Smart, received the our Gold Medal in 1805. This contraption of rods and brushes remains the tool of the trade to this day. Similarly in 1866 for instance the RSA began to look at innovative ways to preserve and import food. This comes in response to a serious food supply problem due to rapid population growth in the 1860s.

More recently in 1936 the RSA founded the Faculty of the Royal Designers for Industry The distinction 'Royal Designer for Industry' was to encourage a high standard of industrial design and to enhance the status of designers. It was inspired by the work of the Industrial Arts Committee founded in 1917. The distinction of RDI is still bestowed to this day and regarded as the highest honour to be obtained in the United Kingdom in the field of Industrial Design.

Today we believe that such creativity continues to underpin commercial progress in Arts, Manufacturing and Commerce which can still be used to address our biggest social and environmental challenges. We seek to release the power to create of as many people and organisation as possible to build a sustainable, fair and dynamic economy. To achieve this we focus on three objectives:

- allowing all the freedom and resources to have creative working lives;
- encouraging an upsurge of creativity to enable a shift towards an economy where every element of every product is reused;
- providing access and the skills for all to use new digital fabrication technologies.

Public Services & Communities

“We enable people to take an active role in solving the problems in their own communities, driving innovation and changing the way that public services are designed, delivered and managed.”

From its very origins in the eighteenth century and through the nineteenth century the RSA has been concerned with issues which contribute to a social, economic and democratic context in which arts, manufactures and commerce can thrive. For example, projects focused on issues of public safety, trade policy, urban infrastructure, education and public sanitation. In those days the state was much

smaller so innovation in these areas was not expressly focused on what we today call public services. Thus as the state grew in the nineteenth and twentieth century the pursuit of the RSA's mission has necessarily involved a refocusing on public policy and working with national and local governments.

Also, the state, as we previously knew it, has been under a sustained unbundling. "Public services" are increasingly delivered through hybrid models or consortiums of the "public" and "private", from Government bodies to private companies, social enterprises and charities to community-owned businesses and employee-owned "mutuals".

It is in this context that, in accordance with its objects, the RSA is engaging with public services. In the present day austerity, an ageing population and shifting consumer demands make this a challenging time for those delivering and using public services. On the other hand, new technologies and the emerging 'social economy' make this a period of potentially great innovation. We believe the key to addressing the challenges lies in a shift in power to people and communities so that they can better meet their social and economic needs and aspirations. To achieve this we currently focus on three objectives:

- demonstrate how the UK's cities can capitalise on the assets of their citizens;
- show how open, innovative institutions can release the creative capacity of people and communities;
- test methods of design and delivery that employ innovative methods of community collaboration and network building.