



Our work

2025-26

Introduction from the Chief Executive



Vivienne Stern MBE

Our university system is a source of enormous national pride, and key both to individual opportunity and to our national prosperity. Towns and cities in all parts of the UK are better and more successful places because of the role their universities play. They are a reason to be optimistic about our future.

It is a system under considerable strain. At Universities UK we feel that we have a great responsibility.

If we are successful in our advocacy and influence, and in the work we do to bring our members together to tackle common problems, our universities will be better able to thrive in their own individual missions. This report sets out what we have achieved this year, on your behalf and with your support.

We know that you need us to stay focused on the things that matter most to you. I am proud that this year, our member survey found that 92% of our members agree that UUK focuses on the issues that matter most to the HE sector. And, despite the budgetary pressures you all face, 98% agreed or strongly agreed that we provide value for money.

UUK plays a unique role in bringing university leaders together and catalysing sector led change, as well as supporting collaboration between universities. Above all, we aim to be useful to you, and we often hear that our convening power and our ability to bring colleagues together to work on shared challenges is one of our most important services.

This year, I am particularly proud of our work to secure the government's commitment to an inflationary fee

increases in England and Wales, increasing research funding, and of Universities Wales and Universities Scotland's success in securing influence through election periods and in respect of major system reviews. Influencing immigration policy continues to be one of our biggest priorities, and one of the most challenging areas of our work. We continue to protect the Graduate Route, we are starting to see change in UKVI compliance approaches, and are working hard to mitigate the impact of new compliance thresholds. Meanwhile we have redoubled our effort to ensure our international success is seen as a national asset, through the Soft Power Council, export policy and the International Education Strategy.

We have had significant influence on the regulatory reset promised in England. We have had to respond to a great many issues in reactive mode, on issues ranging from campus tensions to sector wide legal threats. Despite this, we have remained front-footed and proactive, driving forward our Transformation and Efficiency agenda to support sector led change. We have also developed and launched a major multi-year

reputation strategy, *Future Universities*, which will position the sector as the architect of its own future, willing and capable of evolution in the national interest as the needs of the country change. Your support for this strategy, through which we are partnering with institutions, employers, learners and communities to set out a positive vision for the future, has been a powerful reflection of what we can achieve together.

We have used credibility and reach to champion and defend the great things our universities do for the country by using our voice in the media, and on a cross-party basis in Parliament, the Senedd, the Scottish Parliament and with our members in Northern Ireland, the NI Assembly, to highlight the role you play in national life, economic growth and individual opportunity.

Over the last year, I have visited many universities across the UK, each with distinct strengths. I am continually reminded why the work we do matters.

Thank you for your support, your guidance and challenge, and your engagement in our work this year. This report shows what we can achieve when we work together.

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89%

agree that UUK is well-connected and influential



81%

agree UUK provides insight and expertise that members are not able to find elsewhere



92%

agree that UUK focuses on the issues that matter most for the HE sector



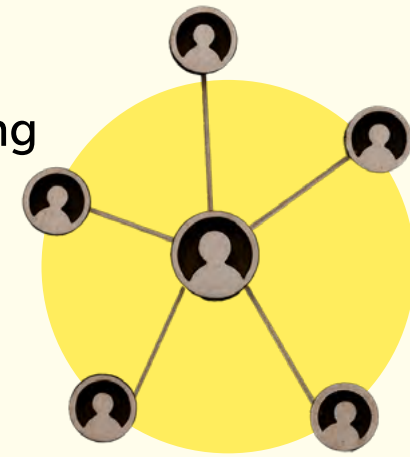
80%

agree UUK is an organisation with an ambitious vision for the HE sector



92%

agree that UUK brings members together to foster connections among themselves and with others



98%

believe UUK represents value for money



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Impact Summary 2025–26

In a year shaped by sustained financial pressure, political change and growing public debate about the value of higher education, we have worked proactively with governments across the country to make the case for universities.

In 2025–26, we have:

Secured action on university finances,

including fee uplifts in England and Wales, and increased research funding. The tuition fee uplift in England is estimated to bring in an additional £5.5bn of income between 2025 and 2030. We opposed, and mitigated, the impacts of the international student levy in Scotland, Wales and England respectively.

Forged influential, cross-party relationships

to influence manifestos in the devolved nations with our Blueprint proposals directly reflected in the education and skills white paper (England), the revised International Education Strategy, and wider policy.

Positioned universities as proactive partners of government

through our transformation and efficiency programme, the Future Funding Framework process in Scotland and Universities Wales' achievements in shaping regulation.

Launched our Future Universities strategy

to strengthen the long-term reputation of the sector, engaging 200 employers and businesses and securing support from the Chancellor of the Exchequer for the role of universities in attracting investment to drive innovation.

Influenced policy and regulation critical to national renewal,

from issues relating to growth and the Industrial Strategy to free speech, immigration, TPS, defence and security, skills, health and trade. Our work with MoD has helped secure £80m of investment and the creation of a new Research Security Fund

Protected the sector's reputation on a global stage,

protecting the Graduate Route, influencing immigration policy, approaches to TNE and sustainable international recruitment and ensuring the UK will associate with Erasmus again. We have worked to ensure that our international success is seen as a national asset, through the Soft Power Council, export policy and the International Education Strategy. We have also played a key role rebuilding the UK's participation in Horizon Europe.

Supported members to deal with complex issues,

from campus tensions, research security, weekend courses and foreign interference to legal, regulatory, and financial challenges – offering support publicly or, where more appropriate, by providing tailored, confidential advice and advocacy.

Delivered outstanding value for money for our members

with 98% of respondents to our member survey agreeing that we do this 'very well' or 'fairly well', and 92% agreeing we focus on the issues that matter most to the HE sector.



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Keeping the financial sustainability of universities on the agenda

Advocating for sustainable university funding

We have secured inflationary tuition fee uplifts in England over three years, alongside a commitment from government to continue inflationary increases in future. The tuition fee uplift in England is estimated to bring in an additional £5.5bn of income between 2025 and 2030. In Wales, we secured an inflationary uplift for 2026–27 while continuing to make the case for longer term funding decisions following the Senedd elections. In Scotland, we secured an inflationary uplift in resource funding and a £30m increase to the capital budget.

We have championed the sector’s financial sustainability through written and oral evidence that has influenced the Education and Treasury Select Committees, supported by extensive media engagement.

In Wales, our sustained advocacy contributed to Plaid Cymru’s commitment to commission a higher education funding review within its first 100 days in government.

In Scotland, ongoing advocacy and engagement across Holyrood helped secure the launch of a comprehensive review of the sector’s long-term sustainability, jointly led by Universities Scotland.

Links

- [Mapped the cumulative impact of government policies on sector finances.](#)
- [Commissioned evidence from London Economics on the declining government contribution to HE teaching funding in England.](#)
- [Future Funding Framework in Scotland.](#)
- [Universities for a stronger Wales.](#)

Mitigating the impacts of the International Student Levy

Having successfully argued against the introduction of the international student levy in Scotland and Wales, we have secured a reduction in the effective levy rate in England for small providers and delayed implementation. Significant media coverage, behind-the-scenes political influence and concerted member lobbying efforts ensured the sector made its voice heard.

Influencing Teachers’ Pension Scheme policy

Working closely with UCEA, we have advocated for greater flexibility in the pensions universities can offer their staff. We have reinforced this message with senior political audiences, including No.10 advisers and DfE Ministers, helping to secure attention for the issue at the highest levels of government.

Securing investment in research and innovation

We helped secure record levels of investment in research and innovation through the 2025 Spending Review, including real-terms protection for Quality-Related (QR) funding and the Higher Education Innovation Fund (HEIF) as UKRI revises its allocations.

We have also influenced the development of REF 2029, helping to ensure that implementation and funding timelines remain on track and provide certainty.

Links

- [Budget allocations for UKRI.](#)
- [Redesigned REF.](#)



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Building political influence

In England, we strengthened our relationships with key government ministers, seeing much of our Blueprint reflected in the post 16 education and skills white paper. We also engaged with opposition advisers and the shadow education team, built the foundations of a relationship with Reform UK and supported the APPUG as its secretariat.

The Future Framework for the Success and Sustainability of Scotland's Universities has secured cross-party support, with recognition of the need for this work reflected in party manifestos ahead of the Holyrood election. Calls for political backing of the framework were also incorporated into the pre-election priorities of Prosper, Scotland's industrial council, demonstrating growing consensus on the need for a sustainable long-term funding settlement for universities.

Universities Wales implemented a successful Senedd 2026 election strategy, which ensured all major Welsh political parties recognised the importance of a sustainable higher

education sector in their manifestos. Through a co-ordinated programme of manifesto development, policy influence and cross-party engagement and a targeted briefing session, Universities Wales has also built strong working relationships with the new Welsh Government and the expanded Senedd.



Positioning universities as proactive, solutions focussed partners

Transformation and efficiency programme

This year Phase 2 of the Transformation and Efficiency programme focused on developing practical support for universities and has been delivered in partnership with sector bodies and other stakeholders. We progressed our ask of government for a transformation fund, continued to make the case for TPS flexibilities, actively represented members in the Committee of University Chairs led review of the code of governance and secured important clarification from the Competition and Markets Authority on the implications of competition law for higher education collaboration. We have also developed a proposal for an expanded development offer for new vice chancellors, begun a project on collaboration and efficiency in research and offered eight member events on collaboration and efficiency, including UUK's annual Transformation and Efficiency Summit.

Shaping Scotland's future funding framework

Universities Scotland is leading the development of a Future Funding Framework for Scotland's universities, bringing together industry, public sector partners, staff and student trade unions, and experts from across the sector. Grounded in evidence, the work is assessing the scale of the funding gap across university activity and examining the long-term trends that will shape Scotland's future. Drawing on a collaborative approach similar to the Transformation and Efficiency Taskforce, it is also exploring how the sector must adapt to meet future challenges and opportunities. The final framework will set out a range of funding policy scenarios designed to support the continued success, resilience and sustainability of Scotland's universities.

Links

- [Transformation and efficiency.](#)
- [Future Funding Framework in Scotland.](#)

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Supporting sustainable international student recruitment and promoting student exchanges

Protecting the Graduate Route

We have continued to support and protect the Graduate Route following the government’s Immigration White Paper and proposals to reduce immigration. This included securing a commitment to the visa within the government’s refreshed International Education Strategy 2026 and UUKi being invited to join the government’s Education Sector Action Group – the body which will oversee delivering the strategy.

Links

- [International Education Strategy 2026](#)

Influencing changes to the Basic Compliance Assessment (BCA)

We secured reforms and transitional measures ahead of changes to the BCA thresholds coming into effect – working with the Home Office to ensure members had additional time to prepare for changes and update international recruitment strategies and securing some discretionary measures (for example for providers who have historically had a strong track record of compliance, and smaller providers).

Securing UK reassociation with Erasmus and supporting Outward Student Mobility

We successfully advocated for the UK’s reassociation with Erasmus+, helping to secure an agreement between the UK and EU governments for participation in the 2027 funding call in line with our Blueprint recommendations. We have also mobilised the sector through UUKi, resulting in 166 completed applications for the Erasmus Charter for Higher Education. As delivery partner for the MITACS scheme, we leveraged more than £1.1m to support mobility for 187 students at 18 member universities.

Boosting research collaboration and developing secure and responsible international partnerships

Increasing our participation in Horizon Europe

We have continued to promote Horizon opportunities through our networks and external events, and published research demonstrating that UK’s association to Horizon has reversed a long-term downward trend in EU funding for research. This also underlined the unique value the scheme plays in driving forward UK international research and innovation. We have engaged with the European Commission and European Parliament to make a robust case for the UK’s value to European collaboration, and UUKi and Universities Scotland have continued to deliver successful programmes of sector delegations to Brussels and other European partners. UUKi has acted as a key Delivery Partner for DSIT’s ISPF scheme, leveraging more than £2.3m to support researcher mobility and pump priming schemes at 20 member universities.



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Following UUKi recommendations, UKRI announced the creation of UKRI Brussels, reinstating a Brussels presence, which will support UK outcomes in Horizon Europe and the next programme.

Links

- [Realising our potential: UK participation in Horizon Europe.](#)

Mitigating foreign interference

Government adopted our recommendations to establish a new advisory route for senior leaders to seek advice on instances of foreign interference and is considering legislative changes to protect universities and academics from SLAPPs. We secured a £3m package from government to help strengthen the sector against hostile state interference.

Links

- [Gov.UK: Intelligence agencies provide briefings on foreign interference.](#)

Developing a Research Security Fund

We have secured government commitment to a significant Research Security Fund, based on proposals first set out in our Blueprint for Change. We co-developed the RSF to ensure it reflects sector priorities.

Creating the conditions to sustainably grow UK transnational education (TNE)

We acted as a trusted partner and advocate for UK universities engaged in TNE, providing strategic advice, facilitating connections with prospective partners, supporting institutional planning and helping members address operational and regulatory challenges. We maintained extensive engagement with policymakers and regulators in the UK and overseas to promote understanding of UK TNE, build confidence in UK quality assurance arrangements and support an enabling environment for sustainable international collaboration. We have published research highlighting the growth and expansion of UK TNE over

the past 10 years to support members in developing their own TNE strategies.

UUKi worked closely with QAA on the redesign of its quality scheme for TNE. The newly launched scheme (known as the TNE Quality Scheme) represents an important mechanism by which UK providers can demonstrate their commitment to high quality provision. The scheme is a useful marker for engagement with international partners and will deliver tailored QAA training and guidance to members.

UUKi also launched a new TNE Network for members which will provide a forum for discussion and peer engagement in support of the sector's growing TNE interests.

Links

- [The scale of UK higher education transnational education 2023–24.](#)
- [TNE in the International Education Strategy: opportunities for growth and collaboration.](#)
- [The QAA UK TNE Quality Scheme.](#)

Promoting Scotland as a study destination

Universities Scotland supported the launch of the “Come to Study. Find Scotland” international marketing campaign through its membership of Brand Scotland and Connected Scotland, helping to strengthen Scotland's global appeal as a study destination. The campaign was subsequently recognised with the International Campaign Award at the Scottish Marketing Society Star Awards.



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Building pride in our universities

Launching the *Future Universities Strategy*

We launched our *Future Universities* strategy, positioning universities as central to national renewal. Our audience research and insights have helped inform the communications approaches of numerous members.

As part of our *Future Jobs* campaign we held a national conversation about what more can be done to prepare graduates for careers in a changing world of work. This involved around 200 employers, including Vodafone, Greggs and Scottish Power, representative bodies and 30 universities. The *Future Jobs Roadmap* will be published shortly.

We announced a bold ambition to double investment in university spinouts by 2035 at our *Future Innovators* reception, to demonstrate universities' commitment to driving economic growth. The ambition was supported by the Chancellor of the Exchequer and the event was attended by more than 400 people, including the Small Business

Minister, and senior representatives from industry, local and regional government and Whitehall.

Links

- [Future Universities strategy.](#)
- [Future Jobs.](#)
- [WonkHE: To repair our social contract, universities must lead the conversation about how help to shape the country's future.](#)

Developing our media profile

We used our extensive audience insights and messaging testing to respond to hundreds of media enquiries across the year on topics ranging from freedom of speech and quality to graduate outcomes and international student recruitment.



Positioning universities as engines of national growth and resilience

Industrial Strategy

We influenced the creation of the Defence Universities Alliance (DUA) in partnership with Ministry of Defence, and an injection of £80 million in new funding via SPG for defence. UUK secured a seat on the DUA.

The Wales Innovation Network (WIN) produced an investment document to support Welsh Government's Investment Summit, highlighting how Welsh universities support inward investment to Wales.

Links

- [The DUA.](#)
- [Welsh Universities Driving Innovation.](#)

Influencing the skills agenda

We successfully influenced the policy landscape by helping to shape a new government target on higher education participation that largely mirrored our Blueprint recommendation. We also established a new partnership with the Association of Colleges to support the expansion of Level 4 and 5 provision across England, strengthening opportunities for learners and advancing our agenda for flexible, high-quality post-18 education.

Links

- [Joint report with Association of Colleges.](#)

Encouraging local growth

We created the Civic and Local Growth network to facilitate member engagement with key decision-makers in government and influence policy, e.g. on Local Innovation Partnership Fund and with MHCLG. [Our Civic Explainer](#) helped bring members' work in this important area to new audiences.

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Supporting our members to deal with challenging issues

Managing campus tensions

We have convened vice chancellors through our 8am sessions to share good practice and respond to ongoing campus challenges, while creating opportunities for engagement with the Union of Jewish Students, the British Muslim Trust and other key stakeholders.

Shaping free speech regulation

We have worked extensively to shape OfS thinking and approaches on free speech, drawing on the expertise of UUK’s Free Speech Advisory Group. This has included leading a joint sector response with AdvanceHE, AHUA, AULP and GuildHE on Regulatory Advice 24 to help ensure a proportionate and effective regulatory framework.

Navigating implications of the Supreme Court judgment and managing student group litigation

We convened an 8am session for vice chancellors to inform our approach to EHRC and submitted a consultation response to address uncertainties.

We also engaged with members to learn lessons following the UCL class action case settlement. We facilitated confidential and legally privileged discussions with senior legal colleagues from those institutions facing claims to support effective claims handling and convened vice chancellors to consider the wider sector implications, to share good practice and ideas to mitigate against similar group actions. We continue to raise the matter with the DfE, OIA and others to find a more suitable solution.

Strengthening the regulatory environment

In England we engaged with the new leadership of the OfS to help create an improved approach to regulation. We have made a significant contribution to the debate on franchising, responding to DfE and OfS consultations and ensuring sector concerns were addressed while avoiding regulatory overreach.

We shaped OfS direction on quality, pushing back strongly on proposals to redefine TEF Bronze as not meeting requirements, and engaged proactively with the OfS on refining its strategy.

In Wales, colleagues undertook extensive engagement and analytical work to shape Medr’s new regulatory system, leading to comprehensive revision of the new regulatory framework prior to its commencement in July 2026, ensuring that requirements are more proportionate and workable.

Improving contextual admissions

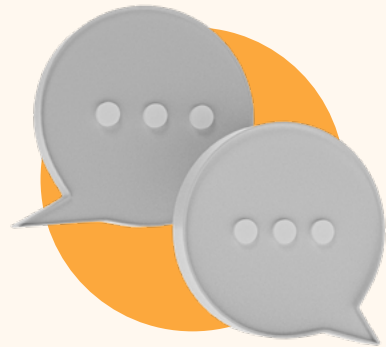
We have launched an ambitious initiative to improve access, in partnership with UCAS and Sutton Trust, with a key focus on evidence.



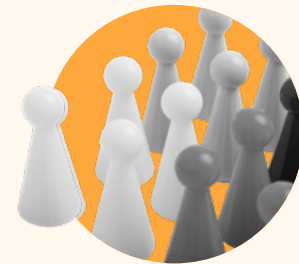
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3900 mentions of UUK in the media in quotes, blogs and proactive news



239 university leaders engaged in peer to peer sessions on transformation and efficiency



Over 240 oral or written parliamentary questions placed in Westminster, the Senedd and the Scottish Parliament

Over 3500 delegates attended our events and webinars



Over 60 meetings with Ministers and Shadow Ministers in Westminster, Senedd and the Scottish Parliament

19 inbound delegations and 94 delegates on outbound international delegations



3m impressions across UUK social channels, 1m unique visitors to the UUK website



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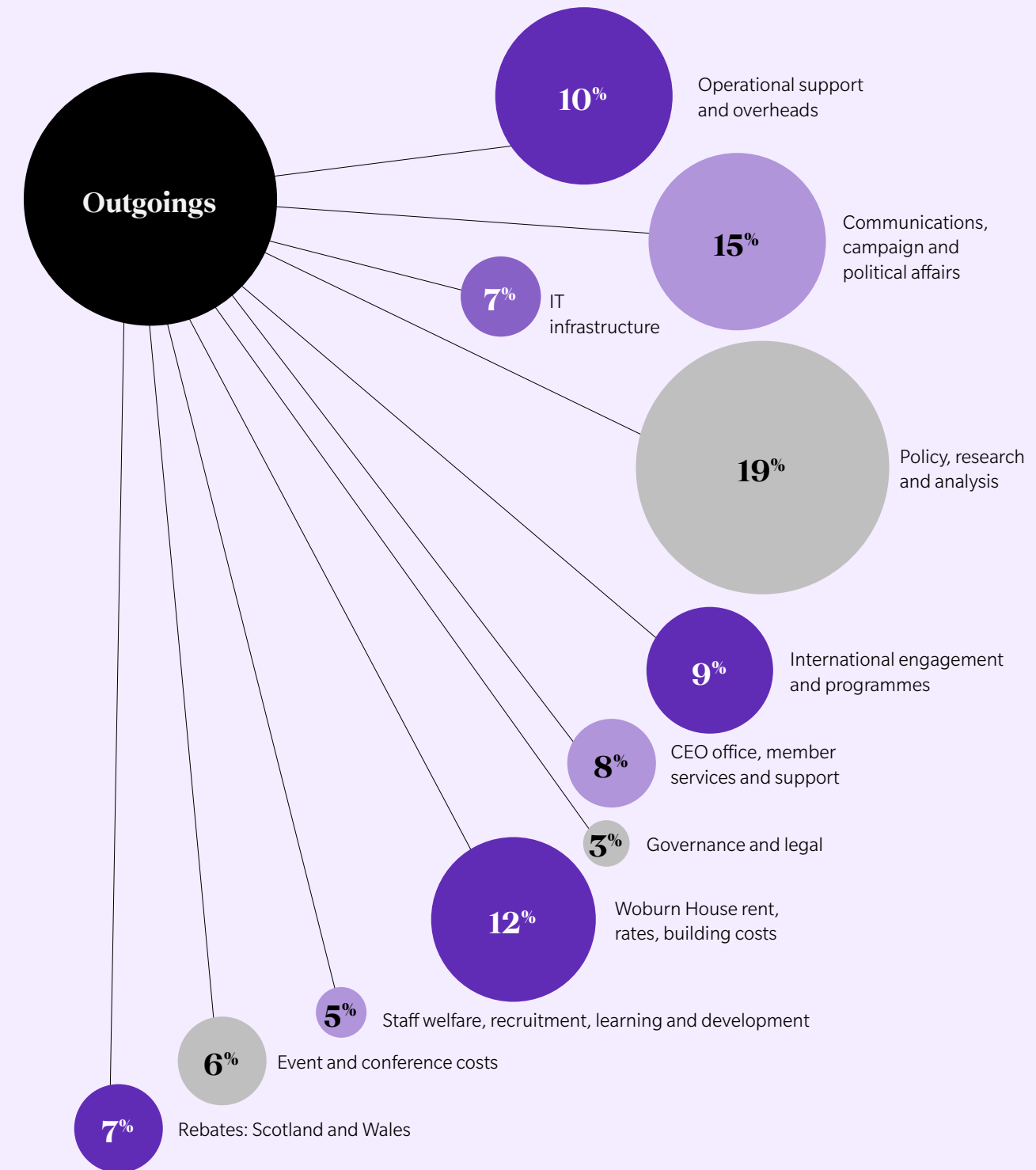
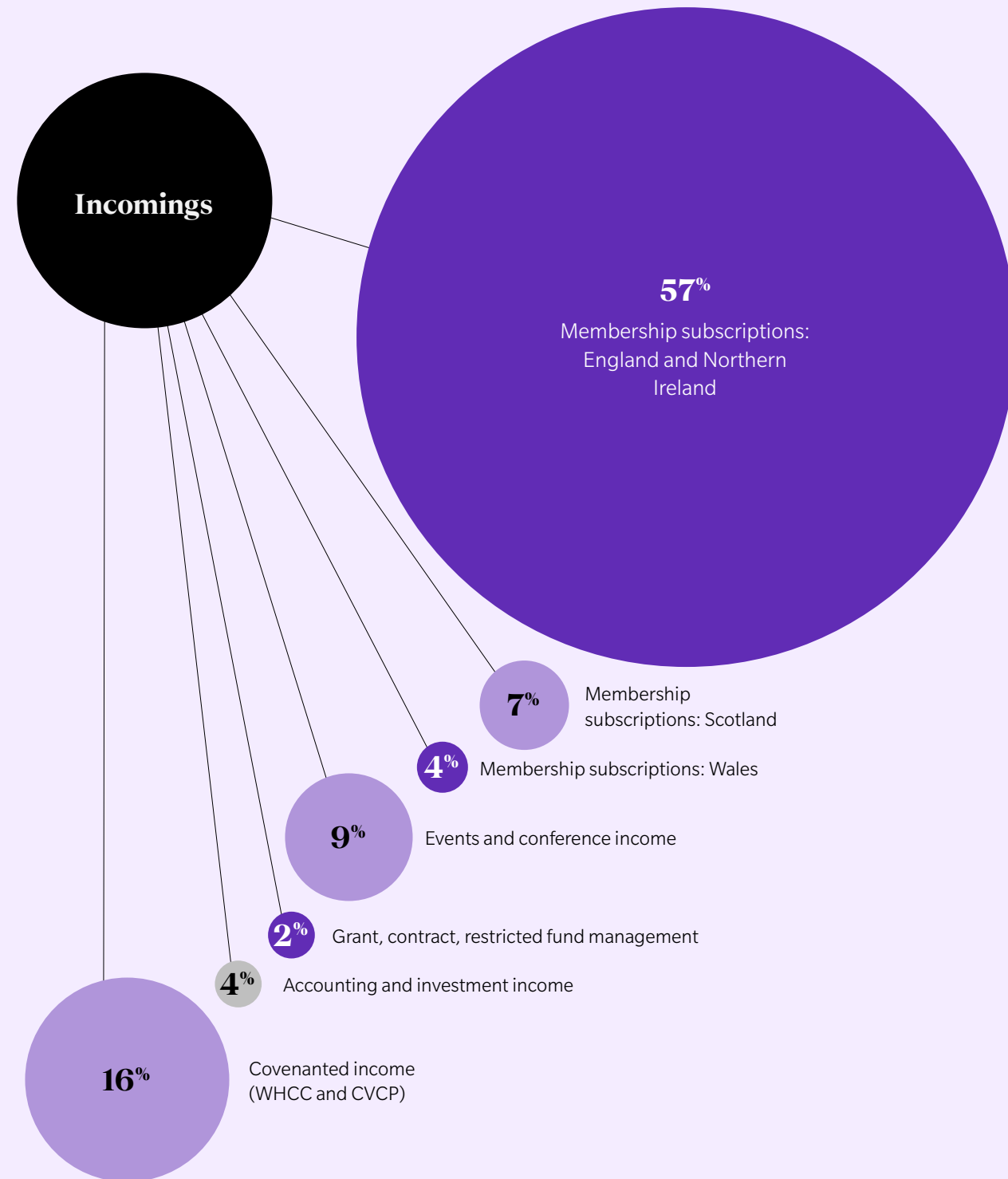
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