

Our work

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Introduction from the Chief Executive

There is no doubt that our country faces significant challenges. Universities consistently demonstrate how they can be engines of growth, progress and opportunity. The impact they create ranges from the intensely personal, as evidenced by our 100 Faces First in Family campaign showcasing students and alumni, to those which have a bearing on the future of humanity itself, in areas such as climate change. I am enormously proud to lead the organisation that gets to advocate on your behalf.

Together, we think our job is to ensure our universities can thrive and, by doing so, better serve society. Our strategy, launched earlier this year, sets out how we will do this. This report describes some of the work we've been doing over the last 12 months to achieve our goal.

It has been a challenging year for the university sector. Financial pressures across all four nations of the UK, geopolitics, political hostility towards the quality and value of the education our universities provide, finding ourselves at the centre of culture wars, and uncertainty about international student mobility have all impacted universities' ability to serve society. But where these challenges have arisen, UUK, in collaboration with our members and others across the sector, have acted to address them, and I hope you can see that reflected in this report.



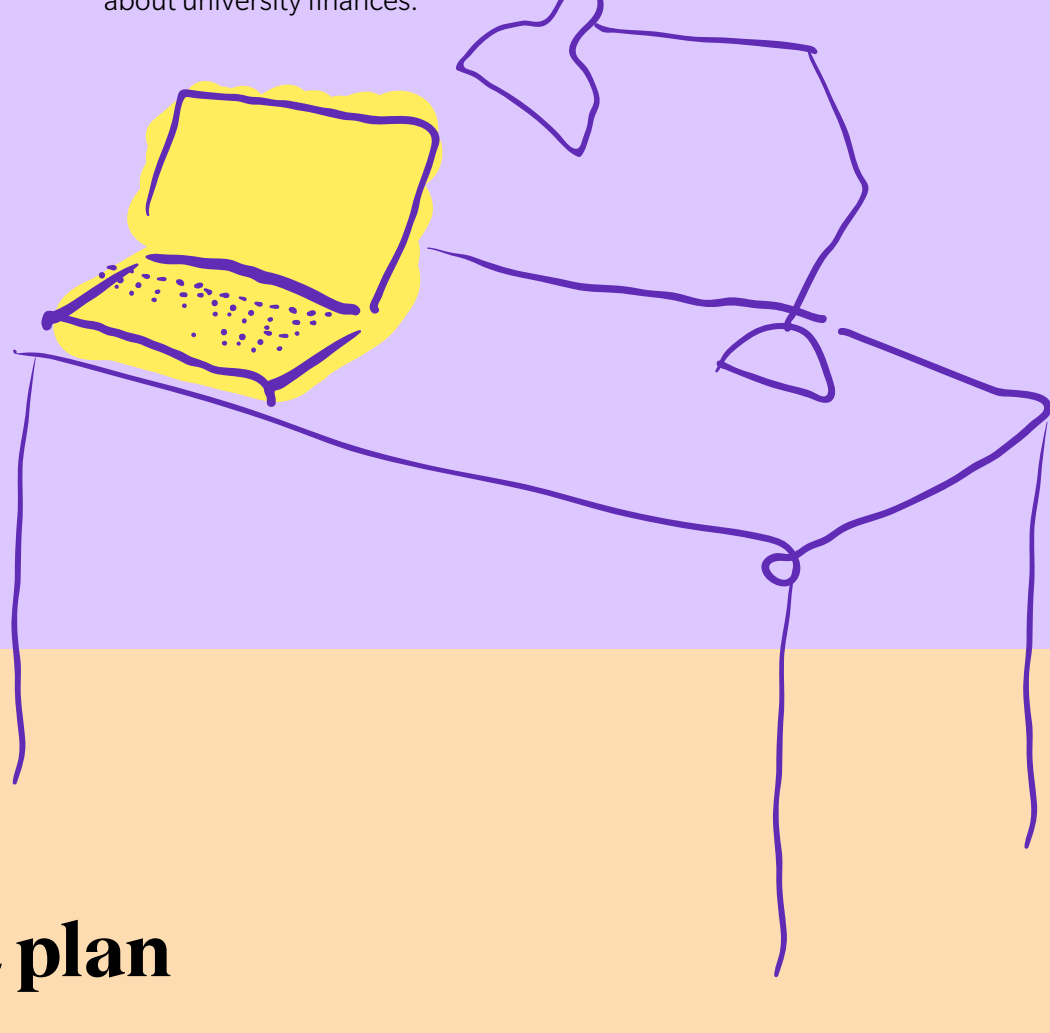
Where criticisms of the sector occur, we have been able to respond with robust evidence, or bring our members together to take action. Where potentially catastrophic policy decisions, such as the closure of the graduate route emerged, we leveraged our own and our members' networks and evidence to robustly counter the arguments.

Alongside having to respond to the external environment, we've continued with our proactive work. We've championed the sector through our positive campaigning, deepened our influence among political stakeholders and others, and created a real shift in the narrative about university finances.

This year more than ever has shown that none of this would be possible without the engagement of our member institutions. At every turn, you and your wider teams have provided support, advice and contributions to our work, and to supporting each other. I would like to take this opportunity to thank you for the generosity with which you share your expertise. It is a pleasure to be part of such a UK-wide team.

This year is arguably going to be even more important in securing our universities' and our nations' future. A potential change of government presents a real opportunity for us to create a more collaborative relationship and to set a proactive and positive vision for the sector. At our Annual Conference in September, you'll see the first stage of this as we publish our 'White Paper' which will set out a positive blueprint for how government and universities can work together to ensure universities can deliver against the future needs of our country. I look forward to working with you all next year.

Vivienne Stern MBE
Chief Executive



Our strategic plan

In September 2023, we launched our strategic plan that sets out how we will ensure our universities are stronger and better able to serve society in the future than they are today. Read the full plan [here](#).

Thriving universities, serving society



By 2030, Universities UK will have enabled our universities to:

- Create opportunity through high-quality education
- Provide knowledge and skills that drive growth and prosperity
- Make ground-breaking discoveries with the power to change our world



To help them achieve this we will:

- Secure sustainable funding
- Build pride in our universities



At Universities UK, we know that we need to develop to be:

- An exceptional membership organisation
- A great place to work
- A socially responsible organisation

Highlights from the year



Making the case for sustainable funding

Our strategy at the beginning of the year was threefold: to show there is a problem with the way universities are funded in all four nations of the UK, to show why sustainable funding matters, and to propose practical solutions with buy-in from stakeholders.

In January, we published the report we commissioned from PwC on the sector's current financial sustainability. This, combined with media and political engagement, made it clear that there is a problem, and since then we have seen the narrative around university finances shift markedly with widespread understanding of the scale of the challenge. In response, we know that DfE have increased resource on HE finances and, in May, the Ofs conducted a similar exercise to PwC, which further highlighted the challenges facing the English sector.

Our upcoming priorities will be working with a new government to find longer term solutions to the funding challenges including through our 'White Paper' project, supporting members with transformation through resources and our convening power, building on February's 'Survive of Thrive' Financial Sustainability event, and ensuring there are appropriate contingency plans in place in the event of provider failure. The Labour party manifesto makes it clear that financial sustainability of the higher education sector is seen as a significant issue.



Preparing our Higher Education and Research 'White Paper'

In expectation of a new government and a comprehensive spending review in the autumn, we are preparing an (as yet unnamed) higher education and research 'White Paper'. This document will set a positive blueprint for the future of the sector, making clear recommendations on the changes government and universities themselves can make to deliver against the UK's needs.

The White Paper will consist of eight chapters, the development each of which will be led by an expert Commissioner with the help of an expert advisory group, tackling a different area of the higher education landscape. In consultation with colleagues in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland some content will be UK-wide in scope, and others England-only.

This year, we have convened the Commission, led by our president Professor Dame Sally Mapstone, held discussions at the May members meeting, gathered evidence to make our case for change, and begun developing recommendations with the advisory groups.

The white paper will be published in September, and working with stakeholders and members to take forward the recommendations will form a key part of delivery for the 2024/25 operational year.



Protecting the graduate route

As part of a monumental cross-sector effort, UUK and UUKI were central to preserving the Graduate Route.

During the Spring, we coordinated the sector response to the Migration Advisory Committee's (MAC) rapid review of the graduate route, meeting weekly with the MAC secretariat to provide input and collate evidence from across the sector. We engaged MPs, Peers and wider stakeholders across the political spectrum and secured coverage highlighting the importance of the Graduate Route.

Following evidence gathered from members, we were able to make a robust case with officials and others, that government interventions had reduced international student recruitment. We were able to make it clear that further changes to the policy environment would be catastrophic for the sector and by extension, to the future prosperity of the UK. As a result, Number 10 dropped plans to restrict the route, and there was no reference to it in the Conservative Manifesto.



Preparing for a general election

With the expectation of a General Election at some point in 2024, we have formulated and delivered a UK election strategy. This has meant increased engagement with ministers, shadow ministers, their advisors and officials.

In February, we published our manifesto entitled 'Opportunity and growth: a manifesto from Universities UK'. This set out how universities and the next government can work closely to support a national drive to achieve stronger economic growth and improve opportunities for individuals and for communities across the whole of the UK. It included clear, evidenced asks including reforming the student maintenance package, returning teaching investment in England to 2015-16 levels, a long-term strategic approach to R&D, and ensuring universities are able to meet skills needs and boost their local communities.

With a snap election called for July, we were well prepared to act quickly, delivering General Election guidance for members, summaries of manifestos, and working with the Electoral Commission to boost student voter registration.

Other strategic work



Opportunity through high-quality education

This year, we continued our work on student cost of living, including lobbying on improved maintenance package in England. We tied this ask to our '100 faces' campaign which highlighted the transformative impact of university on first generation students and their impact on society. This campaign secured impressive local and national media coverage; showcased how raised diversity of access to talent leads to growth and greater awareness of the need for a fairer and more sustainable maintenance package.

We continue to work closely with UCAS, Ofqual and devolved equivalents and DfE to ensure university admissions support fairness and transparency, including by engaging with and supporting UCAS' reform package. Following negative coverage in the Sunday Times, we have taken action to stave off damaging government intervention, including by reviewing our admissions code of practice, promoting the Agent Quality Framework, and co-commissioning the QAA's review international foundation programmes and international year ones.

Elsewhere internationally, we influenced DfE to steer decisions about dependent visas away from a ranking-based approach, influenced the design of the ranking programme with several UUKI recommendations incorporated, concluded our work with AdvanceHE

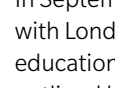
on EDI in TNE, and developed our outward student mobility working group. The second part of UUKI's #WeAreInternational campaign celebrated the contributions of international students graduates and alumni.

We continue to support members with student experience issues including convening members and stakeholder groups on supporting student mental health, harassment and other student experience challenges, including extensive support and resources in Israel and Gaza (outlined below).

On regulatory and quality matters, we fed into and influenced the recommendations on the House of Lords inquiry into the Ofs, worked closely with DfE on franchise provision and the NAO report, with others we launched the new UK Quality Council, and liaised with JISC, HESPA and the Ofs on difficulties with rollout of Data Futures. This policy work was complemented by outward messaging; vigorously responding to attacks on poor quality and low value, disseminating analysis on longitudinal employment outcomes, and ensuring quality and value was a thread running through our campaigns and briefings.

Key publications

- 100 faces campaign - first in family
- Value of university campaign
- TEF explainer
- #WeAreInternational campaign
- Analysis of graduate employment outcomes
- Understanding the impact of regulatory burden
- Managing risks in TNE partnerships
- Internationalisation at Home: an introductory handbook



Knowledge and skills for growth and prosperity

In September we published our report in collaboration with London Economics on the contribution the higher education sector makes to the UK economy. The report outlined how universities contribute over £130bn and support over a quarter of a million jobs. The report gained widespread national and local coverage. The findings later fed into a series of regional briefings about economic growth highlighting how universities spark growth.

Our joint report with HEPI also highlighted the annual contribution of international students to the economy, showing a £41.5bn net contribution with each parliamentary constituency £58m better off on average.

Our lobbying with others, notably the Universities Wales team, on a need for short term funding to address gaps in local innovation funding resulted in the government announcing a new £60m Regional Innovation Fund (RIF). We continue to build and share evidence on the impact of RIF and other funding streams such as HEIF, and continue to work closely with UKRI and other funders across the devolved administrations.

We closely engaged with HMT on the review of university spinouts and meet regularly with Research England and UKRI to support and influence the implementation of its recommendations.

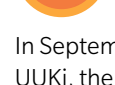
Our jobs of the future campaign work highlighted how universities were central to delivering future skills needs and findings have been central to briefings with stakeholders and political influencers on the impact of HE.

We engaged with the NHS and wider stakeholders to ensure the role of universities was clear in the NHS long term workforce plan and published research with Nutfield Trust into how greater financial support is needed to meet the ambitious targets. Our manifesto also sets out how universities and government can ensure the future needs of the teaching workforce can also be met.

We have continued to work closely with DfE, SLC and Ofs to influence the introduction of the LLE.

Key publications

- The impact of the higher education sector on the UK economy
- The cost and benefits of international higher education students to the UK
- Jobs of the future
- Universities powering the NHS



Ground-breaking discoveries

In September, after years of lobbying by UUK and UUKI, the UK's association to Horizon Europe was announced. Since then, we have been working to ensure that the UK's participation in the programme, including developing asks to share with potential funders.

We also secured confirmation of International Science Partnerships Fund (ISPF) ODA funding allocation, and have worked closely with DSIT and partner organisations on the developing the strategy for ISPF and its delivery.

We continued to make a case for the importance of a longer-term sustainable R&D system, engaging with UKRI, DSIT, ministers and shadow ministers, supporting an APPUG on discovery research, and developing shared messages on the evidence of R&D contributions.

With input from members and our policy network, we have shaped development of the next iteration of the REF, including on people, culture and environment indicators and through the consultation on Open Access. We also supported and fed into the Bureaucracy Review, Landscape Review the Science and Technology Framework.

Key publication

- Why university research needs a long-term funding strategy



Building pride in our universities

Against a tricky political backdrop, we worked hard to change the public narrative about our universities for the better, championing our members at every opportunity and responding with well-evidenced rebuttals where criticisms in the media or by political stakeholders were unfounded. Our reactive media work has led to over 4,000 mentions across online and print media over the course of a year. This support work was complemented by our campaigns including the Economic Impact campaign, Value of University, Powering the NHS, and 100 Faces First in Family which drove positive messaging in print and social media and among stakeholders.

Through our events programme, member engagement and range of webinars, we have convened our members, providing a forum for them to identify priorities for improvement. We have also supported our member to actively respond to other challenges, such as secure international collaboration and emerging issues in the international environment.

We provided extensive support for members on the conflict in Israel and Gaza, helping them learn from each other in order to support a sector-wide response to uphold the reputation of the sector. We convened regular calls to share best practice on maintaining campus cohesion and to develop sector responses, and created a repository of resources for members to draw from.

Key publications

- Cyber security and universities: managing the risk
- Progress on climate and sustainability

Our services to members

Political activity

Our political affairs team secured:

- 69 meetings with UK government and shadow ministers
- 93 positive public references to UUK's work from parliamentarians and government
- 84 oral and written questions in parliament

Member engagement

- 59 CEO campus visits
- 42 monthly CEO/VC calls attended by 84% of members
- 23 editions of CEO news delivered

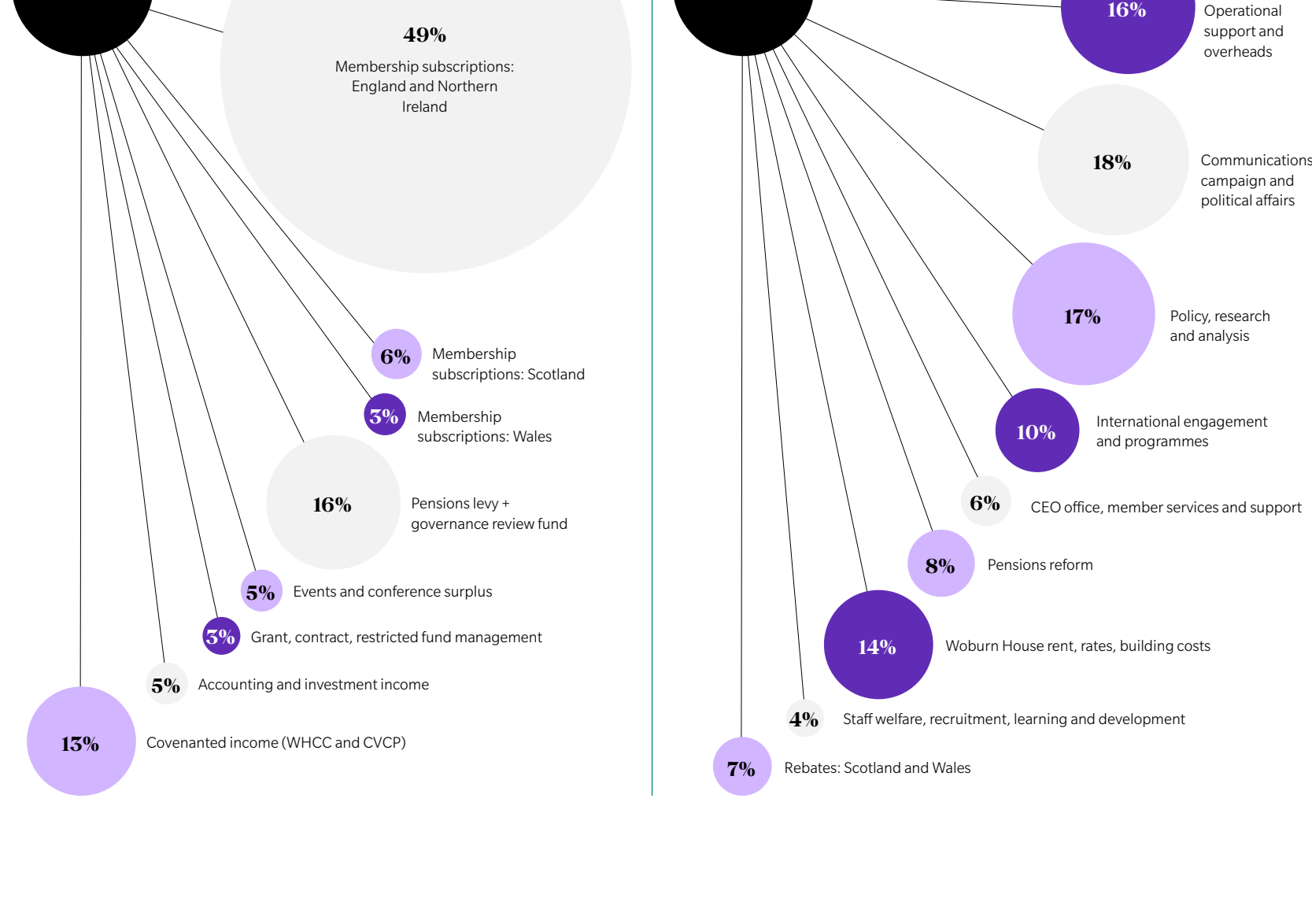
Bringing members together

- 4 members meetings including our annual conference
- 22 events delivered
- 35 meetings of our policy networks

Member survey 2024

- 98% members believe UUK represents value for money
- 88% members feel engaged with the work of UUK
- 94% agree that UUK is well-connected and influential
- 96% agree that UUK has the ability to respond to issues where it's necessary for us to act
- 94% agree UUK provides insight and expertise that members are not able to find elsewhere
- 92% agree that UUK brings members together to foster connections among themselves and with others
- 94% agree that UUK focuses on the issues that matter most

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