

Speech by Vivienne Stern MBE, Universities UK Annual Conference 2023

Colleagues, good morning.

Just over a year ago, at UUK's last Annual Conference, I described the challenges I saw facing our sector and UUK itself.

I said that the one thing I had heard time and time again in preparing to take up this role was this: get off the back foot.

This morning I want to show you how we are going about doing just that.

I want to thank many of you in this room for the time you have given up to help us get our priorities straight.

My colleagues and I have benefited from hundreds of hours of conversations with you and with many others who work in our universities or who care about them. I have visited 54 universities across the UK and met with many of your senior teams, and some of your governing bodies.

Through our task and finish groups, policy networks and the Board, we have had the opportunity to draw on the immense combined wisdom of our membership.

Through our newly established Political Advisory Group, we have sought frank advice from experience politicians, including several former higher education ministers, in both Houses of the Westminster Parliament, and from several political parties.

I also want to thank the UUK staff team. It is a bright, ambitious, bunch of people who have a huge commitment to what we do. You will know some, but not all of them. They deserve all our thanks.

The result is the strategy we are publishing today.

We called it *A common cause* because we can see that we need to work much more closely with our member universities; with our sector's agencies, and with all those with an interest in the future of our higher education system to meet the challenges

we collectively face. But we also want to signal that we have an opportunity to *make* common cause with those whose interests are aligned with our own – who have a stake in the many things that our universities can do for the nation and the world.

It is profoundly influenced by the idea that was sparked for me by the University of Aberdeen’s founding purpose: to be open to all, and dedicated to the pursuit of truth in the service of others. In short, our mission should be drawn directly from those of the institutions we represent, and that the purpose of UUK’s work should be to ensure that our universities are able to thrive – not out of self interest, but because the whole of society benefits if they do.

Thrive: that became an important word for us. For me, it crystallises the task ahead of us. Put simply, will our universities be better, stronger, and more effective in the future than they are today? The alternative path is laid out before us – one in which shrinking income, rising costs, growing public and political hostility and international competition lead to the slow decline of a once great system.

And if we want thriving universities in the next decade, what is it that will tell us that we have achieved that goal? How do we achieve it?

So, here’s the strategy in a nutshell.

In brief, we’re going to focus much more of our effort on a smaller number of bigger things. We have described them internally as ‘two for us, and three for the world’.

We will focus our efforts on your three core missions – on making our sector better and more effective contributors through education, research and knowledge exchange.

Specifically, the challenge we are setting ourselves is to create the conditions for you to:

1. transform the lives of more people from the UK and around the world through high quality education
2. drive greater growth and prosperity creating places that allow communities to flourish.
3. be globally competitive centres of research

But we are clear that in order to be able to thrive in these domains, you need two things:

1. to be sustainably funded
2. for us to build trust and confidence that our universities are a national asset to be proud of

To achieve this, we ourselves need to be:

1. an exceptional member organisation
2. a great place to work
3. a socially responsible organisation

Now, I know that these headlines only tell you so much. As Colin Riordan put it during a conversation with Welsh vice-chancellors – ‘yes, but we always say all of that, so what’s different here?’

The first difference is focus: we are clear that in order to put more effort into these bigger goals, we need to be spread less thinly. That means we need to work together with our expert sector agencies to provide leadership on many topics where UUK has been deeply engaged in providing guidance, and toolkits and concordats. As I said last year, that won’t be uncontroversial, and I am certain there will be new things which emerge which require us to get a grip on behalf of the sector. But to create space to do that we have to be better at passing the baton and sharing responsibility with other expert groups.

The difference second relates to our horizon.

As an organisation we intend to spend more time trying to be a step ahead – thinking not just two or three years ahead, but 10 or 20 years – leading thinking about how our sector needs to evolve and change to meet the needs of the society we serve. Looking outwards to see how other systems are evolving, and seeking to set rather than respond to the agenda. You will start to see this in action over the coming year as we bring strands of work together to form a vision for the higher education sector which we intend to use to influence the thinking of the next government.

I think we are already doing this. On regulation, where as well as trying to shape individual aspects of the English regulatory system, we have several strands of work coming together to support a clear articulation of what good regulation in our sector could look like. You can see it on financial sustainability, where we have been trying to define the longer-term solution to the gordian knot of a challenge we face. This year we will be doing more on how universities can make a stronger contribution to

growth, and to the development of proposals for a 10-year science strategy. And, as Sally will set out in her speech tomorrow, we're going to try to take back control, to coin a phrase, of the quality debate.

Over the last year, we have been shifting our approach. This time last year we had less than 1 FTE working on financial sustainability. Now it is the primary focus of a large part of our policy and communications group. Under Shahid Omer, who has joined us on secondment from the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology (DSIT) as our new Policy Director, we have initiated and started to deliver some major pieces of analysis of the extent of our financial challenge, and the potential solutions to it. You will hear more about this in our next session. I want particularly to recognise the contribution made by Julie Tam in this work, and of Professor Jenny Higham in leading our Task and Finish Group.

We've also been evolving our communications approach. With Julian Roberts in post as our new Communications Director, and the hard work of a talented communications team, we have begun to roll out an interlocking series of forward-facing campaigns. Julian calls it a drumbeat. You'll have seen our work on the value of a degree; on the future needs of the labour market; and today's launch of a new assessment of the economic impact of universities. We're gaining traction with long reads on the financial pressures facing the sector, and we're working closely with political allies, including on the Labour front bench, to change the narrative about our university sector and the contribution it makes to individual and national opportunity.

Jamie Arrowsmith must be congratulated on his success in helping to steer government away from disbanding the Graduate Route. We cannot for a moment take for granted that this is behind us. Jamie's team have been working with your colleagues to ensure that there is a strong collective commitment to upholding the highest standards in compliance with the rules of the immigration system, and I cannot stress enough how important it is that we continue to be proactive in this regard. In the run up to the election I expect this to remain a challenging topic.

And then there is Horizon. As you know, I have been around this organisation for a long time. One of the many things I have learned is that sometimes you just have to keep going; keep plugging away. It took us nearly a decade to get the Graduate Route. We've been working on Horizon for seven long years. I have always been optimistic that we will secure the right outcome.

Beyond this, there are many areas where we know you need us to try to shape the conditions in which you operate. From the NHS workforce strategy, to Freedom of Speech; from Pensions to the Lifelong Loan Entitlement (LLE). We know we need to

balance what you need from us today, with what the nation – if I were to be grandiloquent, the world – needs from you in the future.

It is also our job to make sure we increase understanding and appreciation of the many great things you do. Through our new Comms hub we are making more consistent use of your stories and case studies to back our policy work. We have to sing about the amazing things you do – not for money or out of self interest – because it is the right thing to do. Like the fact that over 100 of you have been working through our Twinning Project with Ukrainian universities. Charles Cormack tells me he has just shipped another 20 tonnes of kit and equipment sent by you to your partner universities. You should be proud. We are proud. We have to make sure other people share in that pride.

I want to end by thanking those of you who sent me your origin stories over the last few days. I have a small bee in my bonnet about this. I think there is something in these stories which will help us remind those whose support we need that our universities were, in almost every case, born of a specific need, or a very particular local inspiration.

There are some fantastic examples of this. I think I mentioned last year that the University of Leicester was founded as a War Memorial by the leading lights of a city that wanted more than a monument to commemorate their war dead.

Or take Edge Hill: John Cater would tell this story better than I can, but he paints a picture of seven men in the corner of some grand room during a fancy reception. He describes them in earnest conversation, appreciating what the University of Liverpool will go on to achieve, but also conscious that there is more to be done, more to provide opportunities to support the emergence of a professional class of women and to meet the challenges of universal schooling, introduced in the 1870 Education Act.

Nineteen days later, the seven philanthropists meet again and resolved to create a higher education institution for women and the first of its kind out-with the control of the Church.

Or Cranfield, whose forerunner institution was founded just after the end of the Second World War by the UK Government, inspired by the US Institutes of Technology model and based at the RAF station in Bedfordshire.

Or right here. This great university, founded in a city which was at the heart of the industrial revolution, which finds its earliest roots in the Manchester Mechanics' Institution, formed as part of a national movement for the education of working men.

My point is this – these cities, and this country needed you. They still need you. We all need you to thrive, and not to decline.

This must be our mission.