



# THE WONK PANEL 2018

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**W**onks - in their many and various guises - are increasingly essential to higher education in the new landscape. In my experience, wonks play two critical roles that become ever more important in a market-facing sector: providing external perspectives and challenge, and using these to make sure that the right things are done.

The role of the wonk is truth telling: helping her or his institution and sector face up to the new realities and opportunities. This role takes analytic skill, but also interpersonal skill, helping professional and academic colleagues understand and prepare for the changes that will keep their institutions successful. This focus on facing the complex reality of higher education is why we have collaborated with Wonkhe to tap into this knowledge and experience. We conceived of the Wonk Panel - of which this is the first iteration - as a way of finding out what's going on and what wonks feel about the current and future state of higher education.

In our work, we see a great deal of change. There are some universities in the midst of radical transformation of the way they work, thinking about new and different ways of serving existing and new students' needs. We see universities challenged by the complexity of the ever-more-competitive marketplace. And we see visionary and ambitious leaders looking to shape the universities of the future; they're asking what they need to do to get from the present to that next step.

I hope that you enjoy reading about what wonks feel about the HE sector, and that it helps you - whatever your context - to better understand the changes afoot and what the best responses might be.

**Matt Robb**  
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**Ernst & Young LLP (UK)**

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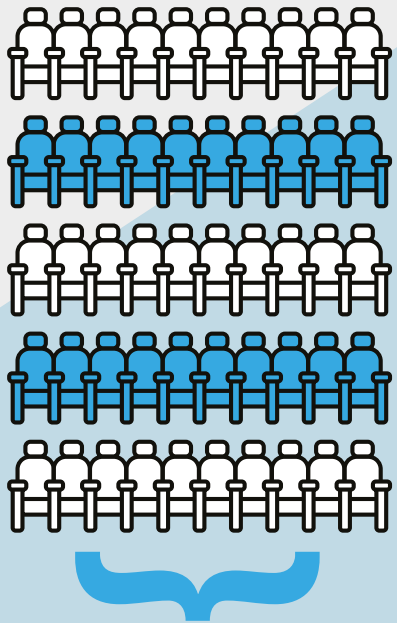
# What is the Wonk Panel?

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Wonk = Policy geek

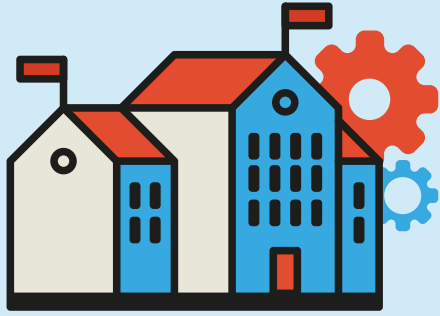
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A panel of 50 wonks

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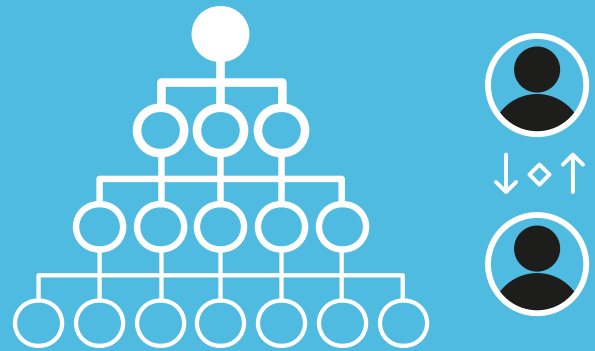


# Working in:

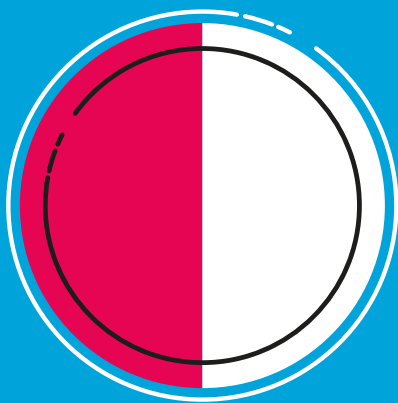
universities, colleges, agencies, mission groups, representative bodies, think tanks, businesses



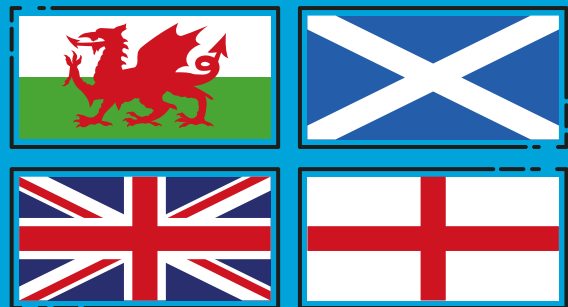
Senior and junior



Large and small organisations



**50:50**  
Male Female



**4**  
UK nations

The Wonk Panel 2018 is the first in an ongoing series of healthchecks on the higher education sector across the UK. At Wonkhe, we want to know what's going on in every type of institution and in the four UK nations. That's why I'm delighted that we had fifty responses to the panel survey and from across the country and from different sorts of role.

There is no standard definition of a wonk in higher education. It's not a job title or a position. I hope, though, that it's worn as a badge of honour by those who work with the detail of policy and in pursuit of the greater success of their own organisation through thorough engagement with facts and analysis. Wonkhe is the champion of wonks in higher education, and so the Wonk Panel survey makes perfect sense for us to do.

The role of the wonk is a healthy one. Our survey found that - at a personal level - wonks are much more positive about their own role and the future than they are about their institutions'. This chimes with what we hear when out-and-about; we see the rise in demand for data and critical analysis. We see the value that is increasingly placed on creativity of interpretation and the speed of engagement with policy. Individuals who master these skills are likely to fare well given the scale and speed of policy change.

But those changes in the sector can feel overwhelming. Consultation after consultation, new initiatives, revisions to old initiatives. A new excellence framework every week. Or so it can feel. Wonks are dealing with these changes, but their ability to engage with these questions can be overshadowed by more fundamental issues in institutional performance. Competition for students, and the ability to recruit international student easily, are major challenges. How can higher education institution ensure they've got a diverse range of income sources? The challenges - and the range of viable responses - are not evenly felt across the country, and institutions' local circumstances vary widely.



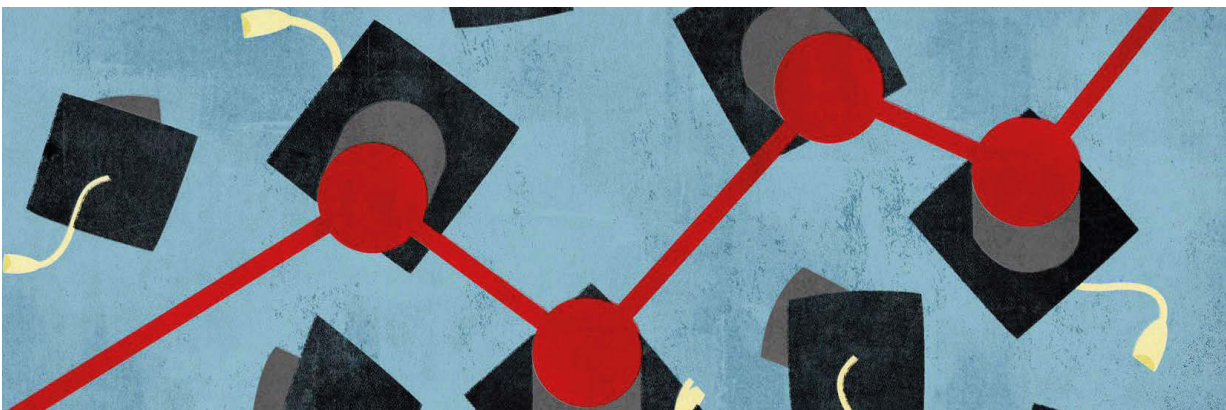
Happily, there is significant positivity when it comes to wonks' engagement with the policy development process. While change can feel imposed from "on high" there is still a widespread sense (though still varying by position in the sector) that change can be effected by individuals and groups. A key part of Wonkhe's mission is providing an outlet for views on policy: there needs to be space - in public - for policy ideas to be developed, shared, refined. Wonks are standing ready to engage in this process.

While individual wonks are prepared to engage, there's less confidence that this is the same at a corporate level. Is the work of the wonk a solitary endeavour? How can the enthusiastic engagement of individuals be translated into the the work of organisations or groups? This is a theme to which there will be a need to return in the future.

With further change just around the corner - new regulatory regimes, the funding review of post-18 education in England - it's doing to be a challenging time to establish what the right strategy will be. 2018 will be just as (if not more than) turbulent as 2017. How can institutions, and the wonks within them, stay resilient to the change around them?

Change can be of concern, but it can also be exciting. There's plenty of change to think about, and so long as wonks continue to be energised by that change then there is a lot to be hopeful about.

**Mark Leach**  
**Editor**  
**Wonkhe**



# Implications of policy change: for me and my role

## KEY PHRASES:

workload; prominence of role; career progression; focus on outcomes; sector under strain; scrutiny; data-driven policy; sector autonomy; exciting changes; responsive to change.

## KEY FINDINGS:

The current HE policy landscape, while undergoing immense change, is yielding opportunities for policy experts to increase in prominence

HE policy wonks feel positive about career progression and professional development

Wonks are sometimes overwhelmed by the sheer number of policy changes





In addition to increased workload, survey respondents from across a range of institutional and organisational types told us that their role had changed significantly, often increasing in importance and prominence, as a result of recent changes to the HE policy landscape.

This increased importance was accompanied both by positive and negative implications. There was a variety of positive implications for respondents' professional development, including the opportunity to broaden knowledge and experience, and to develop and utilise new and existing skills. This included:

- ◆ Responsibility for facilitating relationships between universities and 'external world'
- ◆ Opportunities to facilitate policy-informed strategic planning alongside university senior leaders

Moreover, there were perceived positive implications for career progression:

*"There will be a greater need for people working in my niche field of financial strategy and income diversification."*

*"My role is increasingly important, as the external utilisation of data becomes more sophisticated, internal understanding, insight and analysis, in an integrated way, is absolutely essential to effective operation."*

Negative consequences for policy roles of changes to the HE policy landscape included:

- ◆ Roles are increasingly becoming externally-facing, leaving little capacity to focus on internal institutional issues
- ◆ There are an overwhelming amount of policy changes with which to interact
- ◆ The current approach to data won't be fit for purpose
- ◆ Roles exist against backdrop of sector uncertainty

**"People with my expertise are in high demand and we're getting more senior, due to increased pressure on universities and our engagement with a broader range of policy issues. There is huge potential to influence but there's more going on than I can physically engage with, and I've not found sector mission groups especially helpful at managing coordination to get the best collective voice for my part of the sector."**

**"...it is clear that our current approach [to data] will not be fit for purpose in the new environment and we are initiating a large change programme to manage that over the next few years. The team's policy function is in its early years and focusses on managing and responding to consultations, essentially policy 'firefighting'. As the team matures I expect they will grow and develop the policy role and enhance its value to the university."**

**"There is increasing pressure on my role to respond to sector/regulatory issues e.g. TEF, OfS consultation which can take me away from internal issues."**

# Implications of policy change: for my organisation/institution

## KEY PHRASES:

**data; regulatory burden; competition; international students; student numbers; accountability; performance; partnerships; collaboration**

## KEY FINDINGS:

**Positive implications of changes to the HE policy landscape for institutions/organisations include increased emphasis on local partnerships and collaboration, a renewed focus on teaching quality and the student experience, and a clearer sense of identity for institutions**

**The downsides of recent changes to the landscape include less opportunity to cross-subsidise from “more expensive” subjects, falling student numbers, and uncertainty about how relationships with the Office for Students would play out in future**

In our survey, we asked participants about the perceived implications of changes to the HE policy landscape for their institution or organisation. Participants from a range of institutions including pre- and post-92 universities, representative bodies and government agencies told us that an important positive implication of policy change for their institution or organisation was a chance to focus on local partnerships and collaboration.

A number of institutions, particularly those in the pre-92 group, expressed concern about the recently increased regulatory burden upon institutions. One participant referred to a “major increase in regulatory burden” and another referred to “more complexity and a much wider remit.”

Many respondents focused on the theme of competition. Post-92 institutions in particular were keen to emphasise inter-institutional competition as a hallmark of the new HE policy landscape. Emphasis was placed upon the importance of having a “sense of identity” and gaining a greater understanding of “what we genuinely excel at.” One respondent pointed out that their institution was well positioned in the industrial strategy, but less well in traditional markets.

Various participants described competition through the lenses of changes to the NHS Bursary Scheme, UKVI restrictions and Brexit. One respondent described the impact of “prestigious providers... hoover[ing] up students taking high-profit subjects.” leaving other institutions little opportunity to cross-subsidise the more “expensive” subjects.



Another respondent argued that the abolition of student number controls had affected particularly adversely “undergraduate recruitment in mid-tariff institutions.” particularly in the London area. “This is having a huge impact on our institution, particularly given we have gone to great lengths to keep our entry requirements as high as possible in recent years.”

There was a marked concern amongst post-92 institutions about student numbers, with specific reference to the “international question” affecting application numbers. One participant from a new post-92 provider described their new institution as “in growth” and expressed concerns that falling student numbers could affect this growth adversely. In the responses from post-92 institutions, there was a strong focus on issues relating to international students such as international student number tariffs and Brexit.

Elsewhere, there was an emphasis amongst pre- and post-92 providers on increased accountability and greater emphasis on performance. This was regarded as having some positive implications such as a renewed focus on teaching quality and the student experience. Moreover, there was a belief that greater accountability and higher expectations placed upon universities had cast a much-needed spotlight upon university performance culture. Universities are asking themselves important questions about where the delivery of high-quality teaching and research sits within the current “policy, social and economic climate.”

The negative effects of an increased focus on accountability and performance included uncertainty as to how the relationship with institutions and the Office for Students would play out in future.

Finally, there was a focus on the increasing importance of strategic use of data to inform decision-making and to influence performance, and the perceived readiness of current institutional staff to undertake this task.

**“Even small shortfalls in recruitment can have a massive impact on financial and planning decisions, as well as staff morale and effectiveness. The volatility and unpredictability of the recruitment market makes medium-term financial planning very difficult, despite this being very important for improving teaching and research.”**

**“The greater accountability and higher expectations of universities in both teaching and research is forcing us to confront an in-places ossified performance culture. This is a good thing, but it can sow discord and difficulties within the institution. We have to make tough decisions about where we are best placed to provide high quality teaching and research in the current policy, social, and economic climate.”**

# Engagement in policy process: for me and my role

## KEY PHRASES:

building understanding and engaging others; involved in development but not implementation; direct access to policymakers; too many consultations; column of change; time for creative thinking; commercial impact of policy; barriers faced by small and specialist; college HE ignored; national fora; organisational vs. individual involvement; single-sage model

## KEY FINDINGS:

Senior leaders and middle managers often feel “well connected” to or “fully engaged” in the HE policy process

More fruitful engagement occurs at the policy development as opposed to implementation stage

In our survey, we asked a question about individuals’ perception of their engagement in the HE policy process, both at development and implementation stages. Some respondents suggested that they were already “well connected” to or “fully engaged” in the process. Perhaps unsurprisingly, many of the respondents falling into this category were senior leaders and middle managers. Indeed, one senior leader commented that they “couldn’t handle more engagement.”

There was widespread acknowledgement that relationship to the policy process was multi-faceted, and some respondents perceived not so much a lack of involvement, but a lack of proximity to the policy process. This was particularly true of some working at Middle Management level, but also at intermediate level.

Many respondents suggested that engagement in the HE policy process tends to happen at development as opposed to implementation stage, with one respondent commenting:

*“I think the level of engagement at the development stage is probably about right; at implementation, I personally see scope for more but not sure the organisation would agree.”*



There were a number of suggestions for improvements to engagement in the HE policy process, including:

- ◆ Greater opportunities to represent the institution externally
- ◆ Having a clearer role in relation to the policy development and implementation process
- ◆ Direct discussions with officials
- ◆ To be invited to give evidence

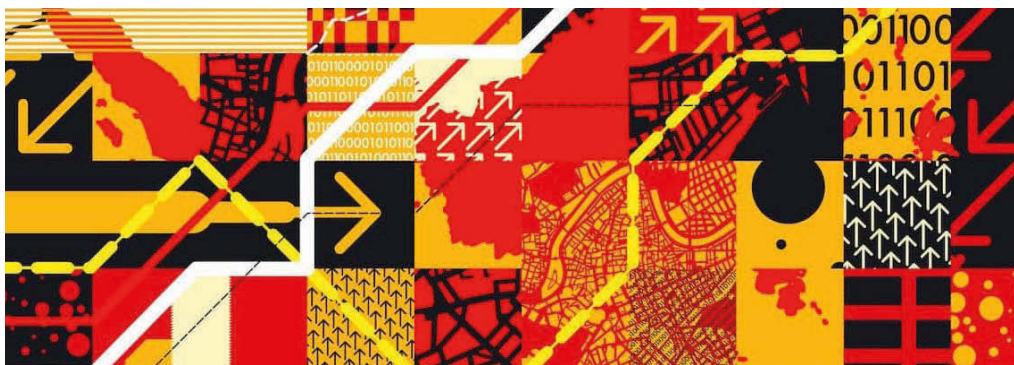
Survey respondents at varying levels of seniority felt that there were distinct barriers to their being engaged in the HE policy development and implementation process. One participant suggested that being part of the further education sector represented a barrier to engagement in the HE policy process:

*“Consultations with FE sector are half hearted and dominated by the big HEIs/ influencers. As a sector we are battered, embattled and struggling to survive between HE and government. We are not taken very seriously - our impact often not noted - and where we do succeed - goal posts get changed quickly.”*

Another respondent argued that lack of opportunities to network represented a significant barrier to engagement in the policy development process; not getting out of the office meant ideas couldn't be shared. Finally, there was a perception that capacity was a significant barrier to engagement, as opposed to a lack of routes or opportunities.

**“There are more opportunities to be harnessed at development stage - the challenge is the sheer volume. I think we'd be more successful if we stuck to a few core policy issues and focused on responding to those effectively.”**

**“I believe there is immense scope for the sector to put forward policy ideas and analysis, as well as simply responding reactively to government or sector proposals. But we still collectively adhere to the “single sage” model of coming up with policy ideas - either someone in a mission group, an individual vice chancellor, or academic or wonk who works on the area, or lone randomers with nothing but a blog and a dream. The Sheffield/ Manchester Industrial Strategy policy commission is a great example of breaking down that model, and it would be great to see more direct policy development by people who work in universities in a range of different roles.”**



# Engagement in policy process: for my organisation/institution

## KEY FINDINGS:

**Good quality institutional engagement in the HE policy process tends to be on a piecemeal basis, often on single-issue topics**

**Concerns exist about whether viewpoints presented in policy engagement process are truly representative of the institutional view**

**The role of influencing policy at local and regional level is undefined**

In our survey, we asked a question about the quality of interaction between organisations or institutions and the policy process at local, national and European level. Where policy engagement amongst organisations or institutions was considered to be “good,” there was nevertheless a prevailing sense that this good quality institutional engagement was intermittent and piecemeal, sometimes fragile. One participant suggested that policy engagement happened in “pockets” and was “dependent on a few proactive individuals and engagement via mission groups.” Another commented that institutional policy engagement was “very good for single issue topics but weak for larger-scale change.”

Where the quality of interaction between organisations and institutions was considered poor, there existed a number of concerns about whether engagement and influence was truly genuine or authentic. Concerns were raised about policy interactions occurring on an individual as opposed to institutional basis, and whether this was a truly representative institutional view. One participant suggested that policy engagement was stymied by a lack of appreciation for policy amongst institutional staff.



# EU, national, local?

When asked about policy influence at a local, national and European level, representative bodies and mission groups suggested that their role in influencing policy at a local and regional level remained somewhat undefined and, in some cases, lobbying and influencing at this level was regarded as irrelevant. One respondent from this category explained that, to ensure the amplification of their members' voices in policy discourse, collaboration with larger, more influential representative bodies was key:

*"At local and national level we lobby, but this is limited by resource and profile. We also (perhaps more usefully) collaborate with larger, more influential representative bodies to ensure our members are represented through their voice as well as our own. This has worked well. We are not engaged enough at European level."*

It was clear from the responses from representative bodies and mission groups that engagement in policy discourse on a local, regional and European level was more straightforward and certainly more rewarding where specific projects were concerned, recent examples of which included the industrial strategy for local and regional policy, and specific European projects such as Horizon 2020 and FP9.

**"EU engagement is good and probably been more focused post Brexit. National level engagement is also good with strong links across government. The role of national bodies such as UUK in an evolving regional and local environment presents some challenges. This role is still being defined, but the industrial strategy discussions have pointed to demand for facilitating greater engagement and networking at regional level."**



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