

FRONT LINE PERSPECTIVES ON HE POLICY

WONKHE
360°



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Introduction



We are delighted to present Wonkhe 360, our in-depth exploration of how the policy-engaged people working at the front line of higher education view the current policy environment and its impact on higher education organisations.

In December 2018 we invited Wonkhe readers to register interest in being part of our Wonk Panel. During February 2019 our Wonk Panel survey was open for responses, asking primarily for qualitative responses. 212 colleagues working across higher education in the UK gave us the benefit of their experiences and reflections.

We believe that we have achieved a reasonable cross-section of the higher education professional and academic community, though predominantly from the English context. We make no claim to giving a representative view and we use quantitative data only indicatively. The value of the insight presented here is that it is sourced from thoughtful, engaged individuals who are keen to stay informed and play a role in the higher education policy debate; in other words, wonks.

Unless otherwise specified the views stated here are the opinions of the Wonkhe authors and not of EY Parthenon

Section I explores respondents' sense of optimism about the future of their organisations, the opportunities and challenges offered by the current policy landscape, and the tensions emerging within different groups in the higher education community in the context of a difficult external environment. We posit that at a time of political fragmentation and financial pressure, higher education looks to its leaders to navigate organisations safely through the adverse climate, and trust in leaders becomes more fragile. Drawing on the significant experience of EY Parthenon of offering strategic advice to universities we consider the ramifications for leadership and governance in the sector.

Section II addresses the specific policy agendas taking up significant time, attention and "desk space" inside higher education organisations and the extent to which those agendas are driving change inside organisations. Though we have considered in some depth the issues that the largest number of respondents identified as important, it is also worth noting the sheer range of policy issues higher education organisations are grappling with. We consider the implications of the nature and range of issues for the potential of individuals and their organisations in higher education to shape and influence policy.

Finally, we have explored the experience of policy-engaged women working in higher education. Recognising that women's voices can be under-represented in the public policy debate, we were keen to gain additional insight into women wonks' interaction with policy and explore whether lessons could be learned.

We hope that you find the Wonkhe 360 report insightful and that it prompts reflection on how you and your organisation are engaged with the policy debate and the strategic challenges presented by the higher education policy environment.

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DEBBIE McVITTY | EDITOR

Key messages

FOR POLICYMAKERS

The higher education sector, particularly in England, is facing enormous uncertainty about the future, at the same time as managing the impact of rapid policy and structural change and enhanced market competition. While there is evidence of positive action to seize new opportunities such as local and international partnerships, and new forms and modes of delivery, there is also increasing anxiety and pressure, which can make it difficult to create meaningful forward momentum and, crucially, hamper the achievement of national policy intentions.

The higher education sector views the national policy debate as fragmented, aggressive and immature. For universities to be able to adapt to the aspirations of policymakers and continue to serve the public interest in the changing political and economic context of Britain in 2019, policymakers may wish to consider how to re-engage the sector in the policy debate and how to build a shared plan for universities' role in shaping Britain's future.

FOR UNIVERSITY LEADERS AND GOVERNORS

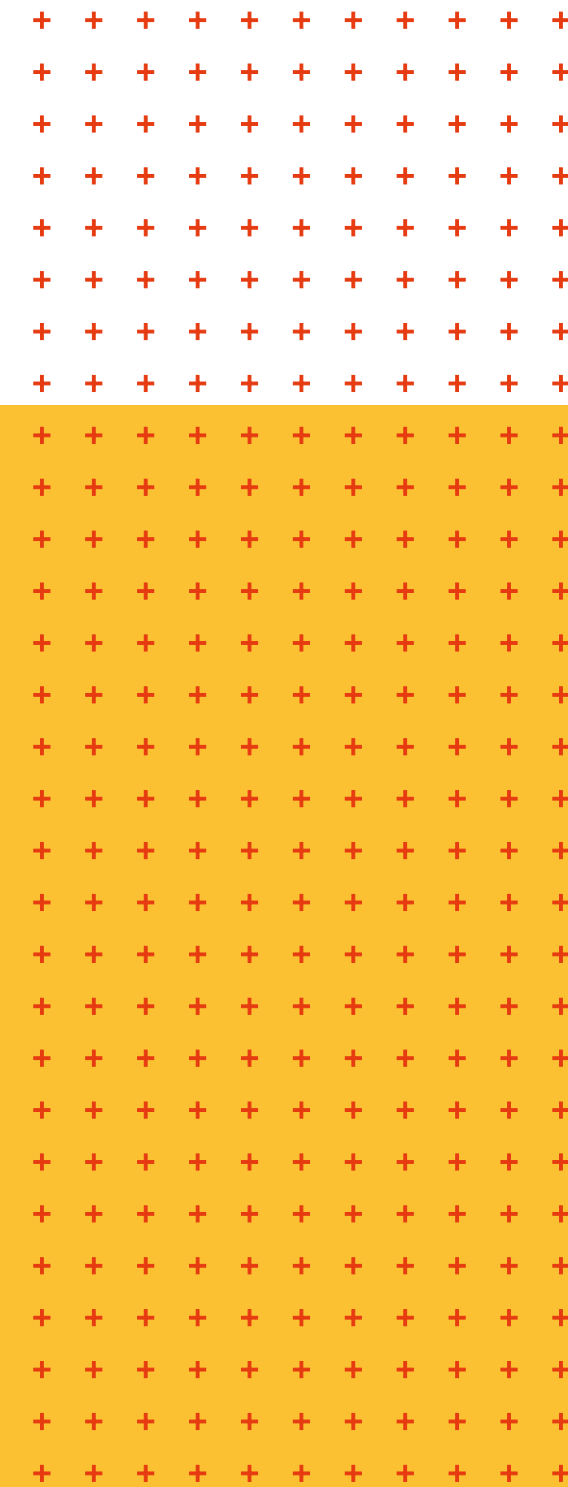
There is some evidence that while those with a leadership role in universities are optimistic about the future, this sense of optimism tends to dissipate further down the hierarchy of university staff. Where organisations are facing financial or existential uncertainty the quality of leadership becomes a vital test of the organisation's sustainability. Strong leadership is viewed as an opportunity, whereas weak leadership is viewed as a risk. Strategies that do not acknowledge challenges or imply business as usual are unlikely to be perceived as credible.

Whether fairly or unfairly, there is evidence of a strong degree of scepticism about leadership and governance in the higher education sector. Where leaders and boards of governors are dealing with sceptical and disengaged staff, it may be time to review relationships between senior managers and staff, the visibility and accessibility of governance systems, and the extent to which leaders are perceived to manifest the values of the institution in the way they carry out their roles.

FOR WONKS

There is much in the external environment that is outside the control of even the brightest minds in the higher education sector, but there are also opportunities to improve the quality of policymaking. Those who agreed to take part in the Wonkhe 360 Wonk Panel survey represent the diversity of policy-engaged individuals working across higher education, not only those who have a formal responsibility for monitoring and analysing the policy environment.

In exploring how to demonstrate teaching excellence, improve student (and university staff) mental health and wellbeing, or embrace the civic agenda, wonks could certainly do more to find, encourage and support each other to create space for fresh thinking. We can make wonkery more inclusive, breaking down unexamined stereotypes about who gets to speak about policy. And we can turn policy from something that happens *to* the sector, to an ongoing conversation that happens *in* the sector.



Meet the wonk panel

ROLE

34% Academic research and/or teaching

54% Professional staff, including policy and public affairs professionals

12% Other type of role eg students' union staff

SENIORITY

4% Entry-level role

23% Intermediate roles

55% Head or director of a team

18% Senior leader or head of organisation

TYPE OF ORGANISATION

39% Pre-92 university

36% Modern university

9% Small, specialist and/or alternative provider

12% Representative body, mission group, or sector organisation

4% Other (private sector organisation, government, further education college)

NATION OF THE UK

90% England

4% Scotland

3% Wales

1% Northern Ireland

2% Whole UK

GENDER

54% Woman or female

42% Man or male

0.5% Non-binary

3.5% Not specified



SECTION I

Navigating policy uncertainty

The higher education sector is facing a range of external challenges. Funding conditions are uncertain, and in England competition for a shrinking demographic of 18 year-olds has created financial instability in some providers. Brexit, constraints in the recruitment of international students, reductions in public funding, and funding pensions costs increases and capital programmes, are live issues that providers across the UK have variable capacity to absorb.

All this is taking place against a backdrop of a frequently negative media and political narrative, especially in England. Sector organisations and representative bodies are dealing with changes arising from the passage of the Higher Education and Research Act 2017 and other regulatory and funding changes, and thinking through how best to support and represent higher education providers against a backdrop of policy change. It is an open question whether or not there is still a unitary higher education sector in the UK. With regulatory and funding regimes across the four nations of the UK becoming increasingly differentiated, and new providers and an explicitly competitive ethos in the English system, the scope for higher education providers to share identities or influencing agendas appears unprecedentedly limited.

MY ORGANISATION'S FUTURE PROSPECTS

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Such extraordinary uncertainty in every area of work. Brexit paralysing government.”

SENIOR LEADER,
MODERN UNIVERSITY

We asked respondents to rate how they felt about their organisation's future prospects on a scale of one (negative) to five (positive). Overall around half of respondents gave a rating of four or five, indicating a reasonably positive view of the future. Around one in five gave a negative rating of one or two, with the remainder giving a neutral or explicitly mixed view.

There was widespread acknowledgement of the policy challenges facing organisations, especially in relation to Brexit, the upcoming Augar review of post-18 education and funding in England, the impact of TEF, and increased competition for students. These are creating uncertainty, destabilising organisational finances, and affecting morale, though some respondents felt their organisations were in good enough shape to weather the coming storms.

There was no evidence that institution type had any significant bearing on whether a respondent expressed a sense of optimism about the future of their organisation, though some did cite challenges or reasons for confidence relating to their position in the sector - such as the respondent who suggested that because their institution was a member of the Russell Group it was likely to come safely through current policy challenges.

Though around half of both academic and professional respondents gave a positive response on their organisation's future prospects, academics were more likely than professional staff to take a negative view, whereas professional staff were more likely to give a neutral response.

“

I now work for a large, well-established and resourced institution. Careful modelling has taken place to try and ensure we can weather implementation of Augar, even though it would mean financial losses for us. I recently moved to my current institution, in part, because I thought my previous institution might not survive the coming turmoil.”

PROFESSIONAL SERVICES MIDDLE MANAGER,
PRE-92 UNIVERSITY

“

With Brexit and Augar right around the corner, it is hard to feel positive about my organisation's future prospects. The impact it will have on higher education will be hugely detrimental to the sector and has the potential to cause massive losses of income to institutions and this will undoubtedly impact on their ability to look after their student populations.”

STUDENTS' UNION STAFF,
MODERN UNIVERSITY

Senior optimism is not replicated lower down the staff hierarchy

Heads of organisation and senior managers were markedly more likely to give an optimistic view of their organisation's future prospects than middle managers, who were in turn generally more optimistic than intermediate staff.

Among senior leaders and heads of organisation this sense of optimism was fuelled by current performance and the prospect of future opportunities, occasionally tempered with a degree of caution about the sustainability of current arrangements.

“

Financially solid, good strategy in place, good quality leadership, continuing improvement and success, despite a challenging climate and poor government policy.”

SENIOR LEADER,
MODERN UNIVERSITY

“

Long history, plenty of potential, lots of energy with new management to modernise and future proof.”

SENIOR LEADER,
SMALL/SPECIALIST INSTITUTION

“

[My provider] is a new modern innovative and dynamic organisation that is growing rapidly by offering programmes and modes of study that students are attracted to study.”

HEAD OF ORGANISATION,
PRIVATE PROVIDER

Where middle managers and intermediate staff were optimistic this tended to relate to the financial health of the organisation, linked to strong student recruitment and performance in teaching and research, and confidence in the abilities of colleagues and leaders.

“

The institution is stacked with hard working, clever and creative people at all levels.”

PROFESSIONAL SERVICES MIDDLE MANAGER,
MODERN UNIVERSITY

“

We are undergoing lots of change but there is clear rationale behind it, even if uncomfortable at times.”

ACADEMIC MIDDLE MANAGER,
MODERN UNIVERSITY

“

Our university has a kind of history of subtle radicalism, eccentricity, and genuine interdisciplinarity, and I am cautiously optimistic that that will manifest in a kind of useful sluggishness and weight against the worst of what's to come for other universities in the sector. We'll see. If not, I'm out.”

ACADEMIC,
PRE-92 UNIVERSITY

Where middle managers and intermediate staff expressed a degree of concern over the future of their organisation, this related to the pressures of the policy environment and to financial instability, especially where this had resulted in staff redundancies, and to a lack of confidence in senior leaders.

Respondents described the perception of a lack of strategic direction, or limited confidence in existing strategies. Loss of staff to redundancy programmes and restrictions in available resource are in some cases placing additional pressures on remaining staff. There was a belief among some respondents that their organisations are not equipped to respond to external change in a way that will prepare them to meet the future from a position of strength.

“

We are spreading ourselves very thinly, trying to uplift our performance across a wide range of areas. This might pay off and be enough to allow us to get through the next 2-3 years relatively unscathed. However, it feels like there is an equal chance that it could backfire resulting in minimal gains and no single success story to tell.”

PROFESSIONAL SERVICES MIDDLE MANAGER,
MODERN UNIVERSITY

“

Poor management and leadership, lack of change at senior level resulting in both stagnation and uncomfortable power dynamics.”

PROFESSIONAL SERVICES MIDDLE MANAGER,
PRE-92 UNIVERSITY

“

Incompetent and infighting executive, weak governors, incoherent strategy that means nothing, high risk external environment, no clear vision or direction at a tactical level to respond to threats or opportunities, morale very low across staff.”

PROFESSIONAL SERVICES MIDDLE MANAGER,
MODERN UNIVERSITY

OPPORTUNITIES AND RISKS FOR HIGHER EDUCATION PROVIDERS

We asked respondents to tell us about the biggest risks and biggest opportunities for their organisations right now. We did not offer from a defined list; respondents described risks and opportunities in their own words.

It was notable that in reflecting on opportunities and risks the quality of organisational leadership came through strongly. Respondents viewed the appointment of new vice chancellors as an opportunity; conversely they viewed a perceived lack of strategy to be a risk.

Risks

Respondents working in higher education providers identified a suite of risks relating to government policy, especially the outcome of the Augar review, Brexit, regulatory change and the possibility of increased regulatory burden, and the policies of UK Visas and Immigration (UKVI) with regard to international students.

Risks were also identified that were outside the control of both providers and the UK government, such as international economic conditions impacting on demand for UK study among international students, the prospect of declining demand in China for international education, and increasing pensions costs.

A second set of risks related to institutional performance, especially in the context of a competitive market for students. Respondents cited student recruitment, widening participation and performance in the National Student Survey (NSS), the Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework (TEF), graduate outcomes data, and league tables as key risks, as these would affect student recruitment and directly impact the financial viability of the institution. Some respondents noted that marketing practices of other providers or structural issues such as their geographical location were creating additional risks to institutional performance.

“

Government intervention. DfE [Department for Education] are clueless about how institutions run on the ground, and are even more clueless about students. The policies coming out of DfE have incredible unintended consequences which are damaging the sector. At the same time, there is both a focus on the student experience, and a complete disregard for it.”

PROFESSIONAL SERVICES MIDDLE MANAGER,
MODERN UNIVERSITY

“

The unknown impact of external policy and environment changes (e.g. Brexit, increased global HE competition etc), the imposition of ill-thought through and ideologically driven policy changes (e.g. differentiated tuition fees, student number gaps), and in some pockets of the organisation a lack of awareness of the external environment and what that means for us.”

PROFESSIONAL SERVICES MIDDLE MANAGER,
MODERN UNIVERSITY

Opportunities

The general sense of apprehension arising from an adverse policy environment can be read from the relatively fewer respondents who answered the question on opportunities as compared to those who answered the question on risks. Nevertheless, a variety of positive opportunities were identified. A significant number of these related to the development of new modes of provision such as degree apprentices, digital and online offerings, foundation programmes, or expansion of professional and specialist education.

Others related to the forging of new strategic partnerships, both locally and internationally. For example, some respondents were energised by the prospect of developing their institution's civic mission and partnerships with industry, while others emphasised international opportunities for developing transnational education and recruiting in new global markets. Several respondents described Brexit as an opportunity (while each noting that they believed themselves to be the only one that could see Brexit as such), in the sense that it could prompt the development of new partnerships and recruitment opportunities within Europe.

Some respondents characterised their experience of a turbulent environment as creating the potential for a fresh examination of the role and purpose of universities, or a different approach to effecting change within universities.

“

The biggest opportunities will come from thinking differently about the nature, focus and purpose of higher education in the years ahead.”

ACADEMIC MIDDLE MANAGER,
MODERN UNIVERSITY

“

The reinstatement of the public purpose of universities, including their value.”

PROFESSIONAL STAFF MEMBER,
PRE-92 UNIVERSITY

“

Take the opportunity to radically reshape delivery of provision. The sector is in a constant state of flux, so use it to redesign what is happening. Rather than sticking a plaster on an issue with another layer of policy, or committees, use this to reshape the whole system - start again.”

PROFESSIONAL SERVICES MIDDLE MANAGER,
MODERN UNIVERSITY

Leadership as an opportunity or risk

In an adverse external environment, individuals working in higher education look to leaders to navigate their organisation through the difficulties. A key message from a number of respondents was that a feeling of a lack of strategy, poor leadership, or organisational inertia are in themselves a risk to the future of their organisation.

As a result, respondents worried about retention of staff, morale in the university community, and the impact on any prospect of staff exercising creativity and innovation. One respondent simply said that the biggest risk to their organisation was risk-aversion; another hoped their institution would not just become a “bums on seats university.”

“

Internal political failings preventing genuine solutions from being implemented. Large scale IT projects driving the strategy of the institution, rather than being married together.”

STAFF MEMBER,
PRE-92 UNIVERSITY

“

Remarkable academics doing amazing teaching, research and knowledge exchange who are reaching out nationally and internationally - but hampered by a senior management that continues to hamper and constrain them for no reason but being both risk-averse and laziness (they get paid a fortune and some of them don't even work banker's hours).”

PROFESSIONAL MIDDLE MANAGER, SMALL/
SPECIALIST INSTITUTION

Yet good leadership was also cited as a potential opportunity for some providers, where respondents had faith (or hope) that their leadership could deliver the changes they believed to be required.

“

Its sense of its historical identity, its diffuse structure, the complexity of relationships with stakeholders. Also: its leadership, willingness to try new things, and its growing reputational leadership.”

ACADEMIC MIDDLE MANAGER,
PRE-92 UNIVERSITY

“

The change (read hope) represented by the forthcoming appointment of a new VC and, presumably, a new senior team/structure.”

PROFESSIONAL MIDDLE MANAGER,
PRE-92 UNIVERSITY

“

Ambitious leadership with inspirational VC figurehead, willingness to take risks, opportunities for step-change in performance.”

PROFESSIONAL SERVICES STAFF MEMBER,
MODERN UNIVERSITY

THE UNIVERSITY COMMUNITY

Respondents were offered the opportunity to share anything they would like to tell us about students, staff and leadership in higher education, using free-text comment.

Students

“

The student body fills me with hope. They feel a little lost currently, and concerned about the world they are graduating in to - similar to how I felt graduating in to the credit crunch. However, they are fundamentally globalist, and have the courage to call prejudice when they see it. The generation following my own will change the world for the best.”

PROFESSIONAL STAFF MEMBER,
PRE-92 UNIVERSITY

A key message coming through was that the diversity of students is not reflected in the mainstream policy narrative. Much of this diversity is rooted in the expansion of higher education, resulting in students with more complex support needs. There was also acknowledgement of the shared experience of (younger) students as a generation coming of age at a time of political and economic challenge for the UK and the difficulty for universities in changing to meet students' needs.

Many respondents commented favourably on the student body, citing their values and work ethic, though others expressed concern at what they perceived as a growing sense of entitlement among the student body.

“

I think it can be easy to forget the sheer diversity of our student body when we seek to develop and implement HE policy both at an organisational, and particularly, at a national level. There is a danger in the move to introduce particular structural approaches, regulations, ideas of HE, that we forget the complexity of perspectives, experiences and needs of our students.”

PROFESSIONAL SERVICES MIDDLE MANAGER,
MODERN UNIVERSITY

“

I often don't think we're doing a good job of helping an extremely troubled and frankly unlucky generation to make the transition into adult life and get the most out of what a university can offer... But I think we need to do much more to break the patterns; change the structure of the first year radically so that there's an actual induction (rather than 'being told stuff'), engage students in serious and honest conversation about what the university is for.”

ACADEMIC MIDDLE MANAGER,
PRE-92 UNIVERSITY

“

The students I meet are not like the 'snowflake' stereotype that they are portrayed to be in the media. On the whole they work hard, are focused and want to make the most of their time at University. They seem to drink, mess about and party a lot less than my generation! They are interested in social justice, environmental sustainability, equality and inclusion. In contrast, they often exhibit consumerist behaviour in education that I find difficult to understand. As a sector we need to find a partnership model that treats their expectation and concerns seriously without acceding to 'demands'.”

SENIOR LEADER,
PRE-92 UNIVERSITY

“

Students are amazing, often experiencing great personal change and human - we would be nothing without our students!”

ACADEMIC MIDDLE MANAGER,
MODERN UNIVERSITY

“

I genuinely despair about the quality of many of the students I see at the University in terms of academic quality work ethic and softer skills that will enable them to succeed after graduation.”

PROFESSIONAL SERVICES STAFF MEMBER,
MODERN UNIVERSITY

Staff

When asked to reflect on the condition of staff working in higher education, many respondents from all contexts stated that morale was low. Staff are under significant pressure, whether to perform in teaching and research, or to manage the burden of regulatory change. Staff redundancies, the use of short-term contracts, and reductions in overall resource were cited as stressors, as well as low quality of management within institutions.

It was notable that senior leaders were as concerned about staff morale as other groups of respondents.

“

Lecturing staff are the squeezed middle between organisational demands and student demands with little support directed at their (staff) needs.”

ACADEMIC,
SMALL/SPECIALIST INSTITUTION

“

The general sense is that they feel overworked, under immensely high stress and do not feel sufficiently remunerated for the work that they do.”

PROFESSIONAL SERVICES STAFF MEMBER,
PRE-92 UNIVERSITY

“

The staff in my institution are overworked, exhausted and demoralised. The management style is dictatorial and bullying in nature. Staff are increasingly being asked to do more with less resource.”

ACADEMIC MIDDLE MANAGER,
MODERN UNIVERSITY

“

Staff working in HE are amazing. The vast majority are highly committed - even if they still like to 'challenge' (academic and professional services!). Their sector is now experiencing daily criticism - and something that should be called out in one institution is applied to all of the rest. I am very concerned that over time we will see our talent choose to do something else, or disengage entirely - similar to what has happened to the teaching profession.

SENIOR LEADER,
MODERN UNIVERSITY

While a number of respondents rehearsed well-established themes about the academic-professional divide within universities, and several lamented resistance to change among academic staff in particular, some particularly thoughtful respondents reflected on the degree of agency available to staff in the context of changing higher education cultures.

These respondents acknowledged that change is required, and that nostalgia for a “golden age” is not an adequate response to the external policy environment. They wished that their institution was more able to adapt to modern working cultures, embracing a more flexible working model, grounded in staff engagement.

“

Although many staff ‘on the ground’ may have unrealistic expectations about what is and is not possible given the resources available to HEIs, it’s also the case that many staff in more senior leadership positions are also unrealistic about what can be achieved by more strategies, processes, committees etc. Everyone in HE has been complicit in creating a sector that is not sustainable. It may be time for a different approach, one in which the emphasis is on creating more ‘deep thinking time’ for teaching and research. Staff need to be held to account if they do not deliver, of course. Carrying on as we are is not sustainable, at least not for the mental health of staff.”

ACADEMIC MIDDLE MANAGER,
MODERN UNIVERSITY

“

The external HE environment is increasingly complex and fast paced in terms of policy and other changes. I think we need to think carefully about how to ensure all staff, rather than just a pocket of senior leaders or policy staff, are aware of this external context but also, even more importantly, that they are supported to influence, shape, comment on and contribute to this external environment in various different ways.”

PROFESSIONAL SERVICES MIDDLE MANAGER,
MODERN UNIVERSITY

“

Staff are very demoralised in HE and not just at my institution. Most staff are doing their best and offering a lot of overtime without more pay. Whether it’s replying to emails/ Whatsapp messages at 10pm because students don’t seem to respect that boundary, or writing papers/grading work because there’s no time in the ‘normal working day’ to do that. A lot of time in the ‘normal working day’ is spent in useless meetings that require people to be present physically. In this day and age, surely there’s many feasible options of having virtual meetings at least half the time. This will reduce travel cost and time accrued to travel for example. I hate the fact that staff are told they aren’t ‘good enough’ if they don’t produce 4* rated work... How about good teaching? Creation of innovative programmes? Having happy staff? Aren’t those also relevant and important targets to meet?”

ACADEMIC MIDDLE MANAGER,
PRE-92 UNIVERSITY

Leaders

Respondents exhibited a strong degree of scepticism in the capability of institutional leaders to navigate an adverse policy environment. Where lacklustre leadership may be tolerated (or even welcomed on occasion) when funding and students are plentiful, the demands on leaders to be bold, inspiring, and engaging increase in times of organisational challenge.

“

Vice-Chancellors as a collective are struggling to provide bold, collective leadership to the sector, and are prone to defensiveness with regards to past policy decisions or the reputation of their own institutions. The sector’s collective response to the Augar Review, in spite of clear political demand for reform to higher education funding, appears to be shrugged shoulders and “please leave us alone”. That doesn’t appear, to me, to be what the situation demands.”

STAFF MEMBER,
MODERN UNIVERSITY

“

Leadership in my organisation is poor. It is unclear, reactionary and disconnected to the day-to-day running of the organisation and the environments that staff work in.”

PROFESSIONAL SERVICES STAFF MEMBER,
PRE-92 UNIVERSITY

“

The leadership remains male, pale and stale. We need more diversity at the top and greater numbers of HE leaders who are genuinely critical thinkers about the needs of HE rather than simply following the herd.”

ACADEMIC MIDDLE MANAGER,
MODERN UNIVERSITY

“

I’ve only encountered one effective manager in [20] years and he is now a VC at another institution - there seems to be little to no training in leadership or management in the HE sector and the staff suffer terribly from this as it is a stultifying and unrewarding environment where those who keep their heads down and show no ambition or innovation get ahead.”

MIDDLE MANAGER, SMALL/SPECIALIST
INSTITUTION

“

It would be nice to have leaders we can trust and be inspired by.”

ACADEMIC,
PRE-92 UNIVERSITY

Governance

A clear theme emerging from the invitation to respondents to reflect on leadership was a lack of knowledge about, and a perceived inadequacy of, higher education institutional governance arrangements. Governors were perceived as lacking relevant experience, constrained by the information presented to them by the university executive, and vulnerable to groupthink.

“ HE isn’t known for effective, efficient, generally *good* governance; almost every institution I know has initiated or planned some form of governance review. It’s in vogue. Call me a cynic: I’m not sure much will change.”

STAFF MEMBER,
PRE-92 UNIVERSITY

“ The governance of our institution is weak. The VC and his deputies seem to operate unregulated, the information that is provided to the board of governors is filtered. They seem to be either unaware or unwilling to take action in relation to high staff turnover, low staff morale and poor feedback in staff surveys. Who is regulating the VCs and senior management in universities?”

ACADEMIC MIDDLE MANAGER,
MODERN UNIVERSITY

“ I don’t understand why so much faith is placed in governing bodies as ‘checks’ to the health of an institution. In my experience, they do not work because governors do not have the knowledge and skills to challenge the executive. Some are there because these are moderately prestigious positions. Instead, they are better at helping the HEI make links with others - which is useful, but not sufficient in itself.”

ACADEMIC MIDDLE MANAGER,
MODERN UNIVERSITY

“ University governance is a monoculture. All business experience and focus on capital estates (there is a space for this, but diverse experiences need to be respected on governing bodies); there is a dangerous group-think amongst university governors that have met. I don’t think I can recall a meaningful conversation about student support, wellbeing or, god forbid, the purpose of a university education in the current political economy.”

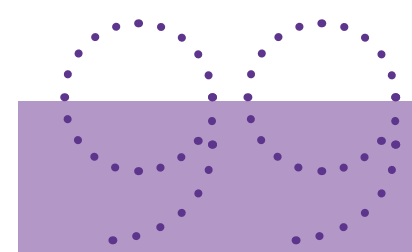
STUDENTS’ UNION STAFF,
PRE-92 UNIVERSITY

One senior leader reflected that individual leaders - including governors - should demonstrate more national leadership, implicitly suggesting that the model of representative bodies is no longer fit for purpose:

“ Universities are different in mission, priorities, size, scale and so on, so there will not be ‘one voice’. We need more of our leadership, and I include Council/Board members in this as well as the Executive, to show national leadership.”

SENIOR LEADER,
POST-92 UNIVERSITY

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Implications for leadership and governance

This section provides our reflections on the research and insights detailed before, a dinner we hosted with leading wonks, and our experience working in strategy and transformation across the education sector.

1. THE END OF THE HIGHER EDUCATION ‘SECTOR’

At a sector level, higher education leaders spend disproportionate time asking the question ‘what is higher education for?’. We don’t find hospital leaders or local government leaders asking the corollary so often. This stems partly from the complexity of the multiple policy goals that government and society set for it, the pace at which they change, and the degree to which they sometimes appear to be pulling in different directions. However, it is also partly because higher education is such a broad endeavour, performed by such a range of institutions, facing such a wide range of challenges. Some are competing on a global stage for research funding; some are almost ‘teaching only’ institutions; some are an intrinsic part of their local communities and economies; some are a mix of the above. The challenges and strategies are diverse too. So much so that the ‘higher education sector’ is not a sector at all.

The implications of this is that the sector lacks a unified voice both in public and the policy making process. For example, during the public debate about vice chancellor pay, there was no single leading person or body either speaking for the sector, or aligning the policy response. This trend, replicated on various issues, could explain the disconnection this research identifies between people working in universities and the Department for Education and the Office for Students.

There is an opportunity for mission groups to play a bigger role in public voice and public policy. But, given the continued diversification of the sector, it may be that current mission groupings are not a particularly good guide to the challenges institutions face.

All this points towards the unit of agency being the individual institution. Instead of asking ‘what is higher education for?’, institutions will be asking ‘what is my institution for?’.

2. AUTONOMOUS INSTITUTIONS

The research demonstrates just how much change there is in higher education, and just how much uncertainty there is. We will not re-rehearse that argument here. In this context, what matters is how ready and able institutions are to navigate this change. After all, the research is clear that nobody believes that a “steady as she goes” or “business as usual” strategy will lead to success in these uncertain times. So how ready and able are institutional leaders to set a strategy and execute it?

We identify four challenges which we see across at least parts of the sector with higher education providers’ ability to do so. In summary, universities and colleges have developed in a world – and therefore *for* a world – in which there was relative certainty, increasing funding, increasing student numbers, and general public and political support. But they now find themselves in a world where these factors simply cannot be taken for granted. Therefore, the strategies, governance, leadership models and cultures have developed in a way that are not necessarily best suited to navigating change in the current world.

a. Strategy

Most respondents feel like they are subject to the forces in the sector rather than mastering them with strategies that give them room to manoeuvre. There is little confidence that strategies are sufficiently creative or distinctive to drive investment decisions, attract disproportionate numbers of students and give the institution enough financial headroom to handle Brexit, pensions, Augar or other external factors. This is inextricably tied to the challenge of leadership.

b. Leadership

Examples of positive leadership in the research cite ‘ambitious leadership’ and ‘willingness to take risks’ and examples of poor leadership are the opposite. Many higher education leaders worked their way through the ranks in a more benign climate, and therefore have learned how to lead in a different world. The challenges today require – for a large number of institutions but not all - a bolder sense of direction a clearer sense of what the institution will and *will* not do. This does not imply a ‘heroic leadership’ model, but it does mean helping the institution to form a collective view of the new world that is better informed by commercial reality.

This is particularly challenging because it’s new to the sector. Very few vice chancellors have non-academic backgrounds in which sharing commercial performance and using this to drive change is normal. As institutions prepare for changes, leaders need to show empathy and identify with their staff and students, to show that the changes are not needlessly or simply commercially driven. Hence the “male, pale and stale” charge is such a warning sign. In the coming years, all universities will be developing their leadership strategies, to build diverse, inclusive and high-performing leadership teams.

c. Governance

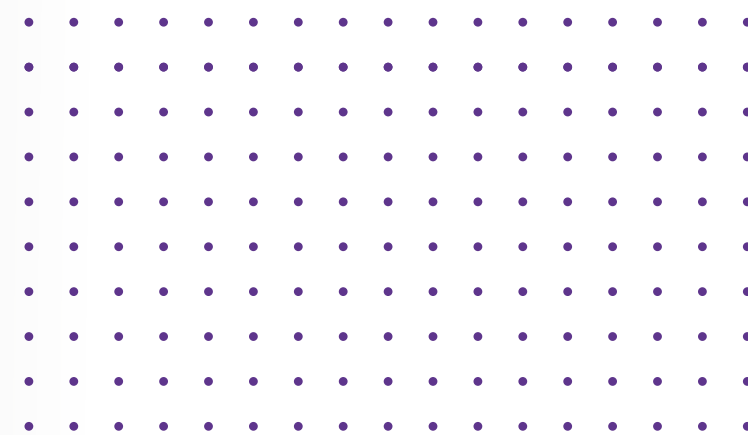
Any leader steering change in any sector needs to have the support and power of the non-executive board behind them. And that board needs the ability to enact bold strategies. Many of the responses to the research indicate that wonks feel that governance is not fit for purpose. Many governance arrangements were designed for a different age. Many have old-fashioned and cumbersome processes and rules. Many are large and unwieldy, with staff and student representatives. Many executives (and non-executives) are trumped in governance terms by academic governance or senates, which have large memberships. Some chairs complain that their unremunerated non-executive directors do not have the time or experience to make the decisions they need, and shy away from taking the tough decisions. These factors combined – each of which have some benefits – make for slow, bureaucratic decision making. This makes change and accountability harder, not easier. In the coming years, it is likely that many institutions will want to review their governance arrangements to make sure they are enablers of change.

d. Change culture

Changing as an individual is hard. Just ask anyone who has tried to give up smoking. Changing an institution is harder, because it requires lots of people to change at the same time. The universities that are able to change have the attributes listed above: a clear strategy, strong governance, and visionary leadership. The final ingredient is a culture of change: staff who are willing and able to be open to new ideas, do things differently and support their colleagues and students through change. The research has worrying findings in this regard, with a sense of staff being overwhelmed, lacking time, energy and headspace for change. This will make leaders' jobs harder when they want to enact the bold strategies the wonks are calling for. Those who succeed will be thinking about how to support their staff through this change.

.....
MATTHEW ROBB | MANAGING DIRECTOR, EY-PARTHENON
JOSIE CLUER | DIRECTOR, EY

HELPING YOU HELP STUDENTS



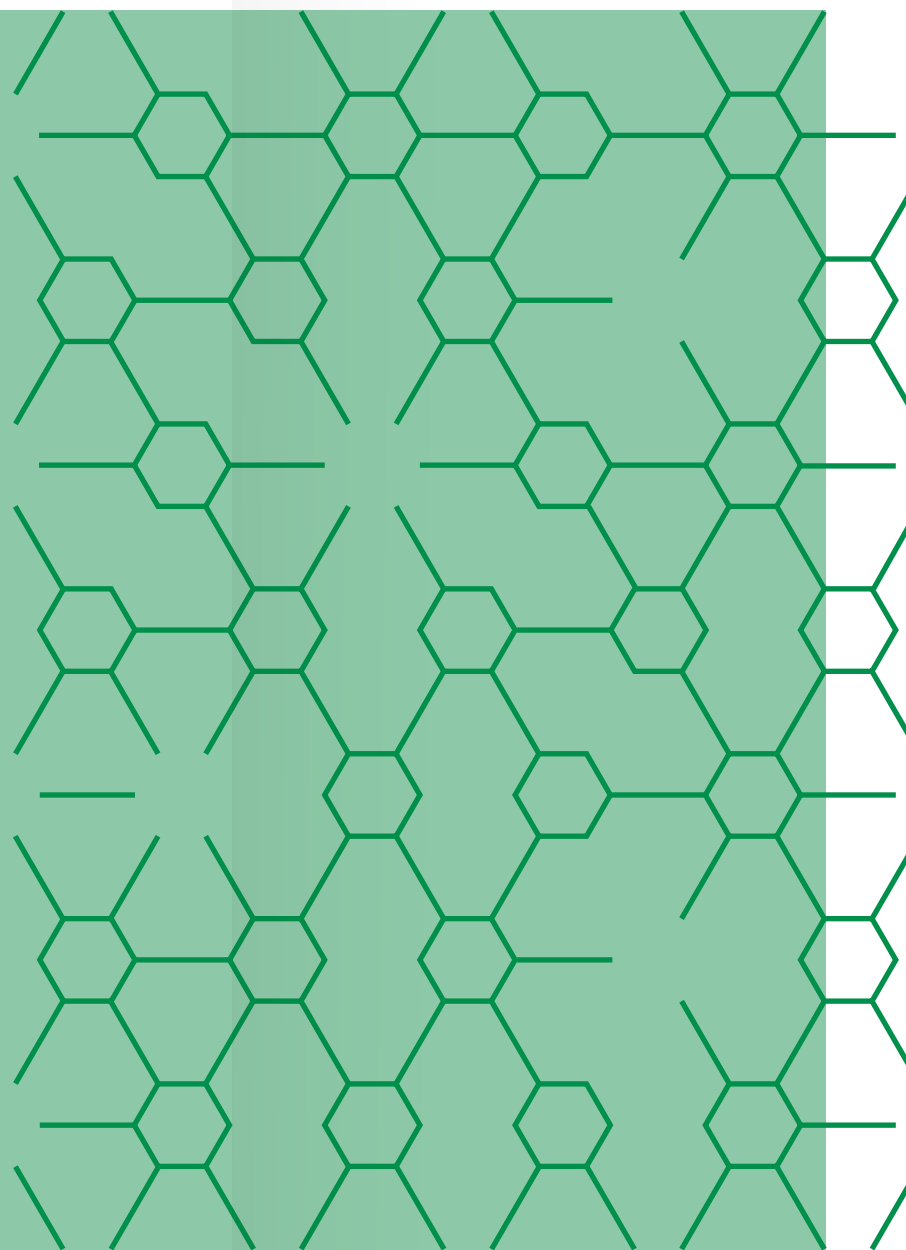
Representing students effectively is tough when policy is complex, confusing and constantly changing. We know that officers and staff that understand the environment are more effective, and get more done. We will help with that.

Find out more about how we can help you by contacting sus@wonkhe.com



SECTION II

Policy issues and engagement



The national policy debate can often be abstracted from the reality of implementing policy within organisations. Every policy change generates work, requiring the allocation of management time, staff time and resource. This can be especially frustrating if those responsible for implementing policy have limited scope to influence or shape the policy.

In exploring the impact of particular policy issues, it became clear that no single issue predominates; the higher education sector is coping with a vast spread of issues. Of those most frequently selected as being important, many, such as the TEF, student recruitment, Brexit, research funding and the Research Excellence Framework, and the upcoming Augar review of post-18 education and funding, have a direct effect on the financial sustainability of institutions. Others, such as student mental health, staff morale, leadership, management and governance, regulatory change, and the political and media perception of higher education have a direct impact on the quality of the experience of working in higher education.

There is currently a strong mood among politicians and policymakers that universities need to be more accountable to students and to the public, but the risk is that the strain placed on the sector by the raft of policy initiatives contributes to a turning inwards, and creates strategic paralysis. We see evidence of a great deal of planning, initiatives and discussion in the sector about the policy environment, much of which is focused on developing external partnerships and addressing regional and national priorities such as skills gaps, but these plans are dependent on the fight for financial survival.

“

The landscape is moving very fast and institutions are having to try to react to those changes rather than be developing longer-term thinking and strategy. The consensus is that the policy environment is quite hostile and being driven by a metrics/regulatory focus which is not actually in the interests of education but drives specific behaviours.”

SENIOR MANAGER, PRE-92 UNIVERSITY

“

We're all being worn down! Seriously though, there is more going on now all at once than I can remember in 20 years in senior management.”

SENIOR MANAGER, SMALL/SPECIALIST INSTITUTION

Policy issues

When asking respondents to comment on the policy issues they viewed as important in their organisations we defined “important” as taking up significant organisational time, attention, and resource, rather than as important in the eyes of the respondent. Respondents could select as many issues as they wanted.

Of the 28 issues offered for selection, 11 were cited as important by more than half of respondents. These were, in order of importance: TEF, Brexit, tuition fees, student mental health and wellbeing, home student recruitment, research funding/Research Excellence Framework, international student recruitment/immigration, leadership, management, and governance, regulatory change/Office for Students (OfS), staff engagement/morale, student employability.

A further six issues were cited as important by more than 40 per cent of respondents. These were, in order of importance: equality, diversity and inclusion, staff pay and conditions, the public and media perception of higher education, changing regulation of access and widening participation, value for money for students, degree apprenticeships.

During the period the survey was available the UPP Foundation's Civic University Commission report was published, calling on universities to commit to engagement with local communities to enhance regional economic, social and civic wellbeing. We did not ask specifically about a civic agenda but local and regional politics and the Industrial Strategy were each cited as important by only around a third of respondents.

It was notable that some issues that have had a very high media profile in recent years were not cited as being especially important, especially Prevent/anti-radicalisation and freedom of speech.

Coping with uncertainty: tuition fees, funding and Brexit

Brexit and the Augar review of post-18 education and funding are cited again and again as drivers of institutional change, primarily insofar as they are expected to affect the financial sustainability of universities. Fundamentally, however, nobody knows what to expect from either. The future state of tuition fees is frequently referenced alongside Brexit as contributing to a lack of clarity about future funding arrangements, and restrictions on universities' ability to plan and invest. Far from driving change, therefore, the dominant note appears to be frustration with an enforced stasis.

Universities are preparing as best they can: scenario-planning for a possible no-deal Brexit, appointing agents in Europe, and further developing international partnerships. In addition to the practical implications of the UK's departure from the EU, there is a sense of existential dread relating to Brexit: respondents talk of academic “anxiety” and say that Brexit “overshadows everything.” There is also, however, a clear sense that Brexit creates opportunities to think differently about international engagement; a few respondents are actively enthusiastic about Brexit, seeing opportunities to reshape international recruitment.

In anticipation of potential funding cuts, universities are looking closely at costs and taking steps to reduce activities that are perceived as financially unsustainable such as courses with small numbers of students. These activities are by no means confined to English institutions; a change to the English funding system would have a direct impact on the financial health of institutions in the rest of the UK. Some respondents reflect that general political instability may result in the Augar review not being implemented in its entirety.

All is not entirely miserable, however; there is a discernible appetite for upheaval among some respondents, who are keen not to let a good crisis go to waste. One respondent talks of the opportunity to “radically reshape delivery” while another hopes for “a shift in what the sector values.”

“

The biggest uncertainty that dominates conversations is: outcome and impact of Augar - Fees review in England matched with challenging UGFT recruitment, against a backdrop of uncertainty with Brexit and rising staff and infrastructure costs (pension costs being a key consideration). All of this equates to a tension and overt focus from Executive on financial stability, to maintain surpluses, to maintain continuity.”

PROFESSIONAL SERVICES MIDDLE MANAGER, MODERN UNIVERSITY

“

Brexit presents a fantastic opportunity for diversifying our international recruitment. It baffles me how blind so many of my sector colleagues are in seeing this.”

PROFESSIONAL SERVICES MIDDLE MANAGER, MODERN UNIVERSITY

“

Tuition fees - and the more general question of financial sustainability, including USS sustainability and affordability - are driving huge discussions about prioritisation, efficiency, cross-subsidisation, and productivity.”

PROFESSIONAL SERVICES MIDDLE MANAGER, PRE-92 UNIVERSITY

“

It's of paramount importance the [Augar] review doesn't pander to the far left's misinformed view of fairness. Lower fees won't make students any better off due to repayment terms and they'll make institutions a hell of a lot worse off. Many will close or merge, and the rest will have less working capital to engage in vital widening participation activities.”

PROFESSIONAL SERVICES MIDDLE MANAGER, MODERN UNIVERSITY

Home and international student recruitment

Since 2015 the English sector has been navigating an increasingly competitive home student recruitment environment, as the removal of student number controls combined with an annual decline in the number of 18 year-olds in the general population, a trend that is only set to reverse in 2021.

During the same period, although there has been no official cap on the numbers of international students entering the UK, stringent Home Office policies such as the ten per cent visa refusal threshold have created a drag on international student recruitment growth. Brexit raises the prospect of unpredictable changes in the EU student recruitment market, as EU students will most likely no longer be eligible for student loans.

Given that institutional financial sustainability depends on student recruitment it is hardly surprising that recruitment is one of the big issues preoccupying minds in universities. The impact of competition comes through in responses, with some contending that the experience of students has been compromised by an aggressive policy of expansion, while others express concern over the quality of students recruited. The pressure of meeting recruitment targets is noted by a number of respondents with one commenting on the “heads down” mentality that recruitment creates. Others note that efforts to widen participation have become subsumed into wider recruitment targets.

Student recruitment is characterised as a driver of institutional change, especially where a failure to recruit has led to staffing reductions and restructures. The annual recruitment cycle drives financial planning and investment leading, in the words of one respondent, to the “perception of a hand to mouth existence.” Another said simply, “without students, we cannot operate.”

A clear trend is in the expansion of degree apprenticeships to widen participation and address skills gaps, although respondents commented on the effort involved in setting these up, the “nightmare” of reporting to the Education and Skills Funding Agency and uncertainty over whether the funding available is actually covering the cost of apprenticeship delivery.

The Office for Students’ recent report on the financial sustainability of the English sector suggests that universities, especially those that have borne the brunt of increased competition, are forecasting home and international student number growth over the next few years that at aggregate level is highly unrealistic. Yet responses tell us that there appears to be no compelling alternative to the current practice of chasing students at all costs.

Beyond 2021 a steady and sustained growth in demand for higher education is expected, as the number of 18 year-olds in the general population increases, many of whom will be the children of university-educated parents. For some providers, the goal may simply be to hang on until then. Yet the structural dependence of the sector on perpetual growth in student numbers to manage increasing costs is clearly an issue. With the Augar review expected to propose steps actively to divert prospective university students into other forms of provision such as higher technical qualifications, in the medium term a more wholesale review of the cost model in higher education may be required.

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We are driven almost exclusively by target numbers, most of which are impossible to attain.”

PROFESSIONAL SERVICES MIDDLE MANAGER, MODERN UNIVERSITY

“

Right now it’s survival. Recruitment challenges, rising costs, fee cap, value for money, OfS pressures, all making it quite a challenge on many fronts. But it’s a house of cards I’d say.”

SENIOR MANAGER, SMALL AND SPECIALIST INSTITUTION

“

The ever-increasing pressure on us to recruit more broadly from home students is leading to massive investment in various schemes intended to reach prospective applicants. Very little of this is tested and its effectiveness is still unmeasured. But the pressure to be seen to do something is very great and has some perverse outcomes.”

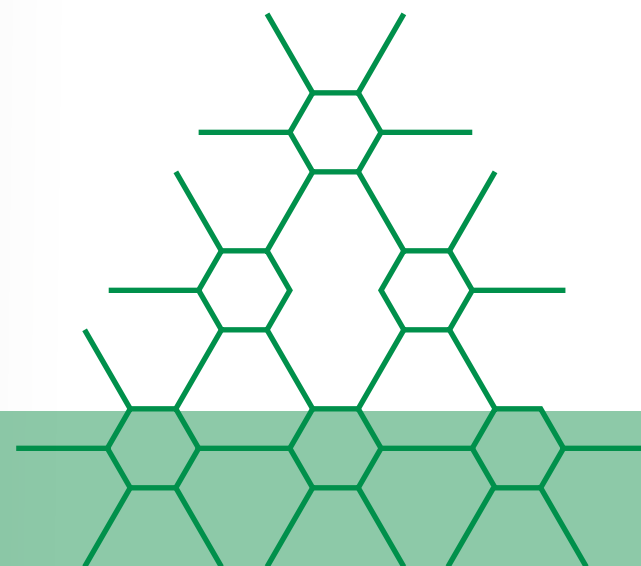
ACADEMIC MIDDLE MANAGER, PRE-92 UNIVERSITY

Teaching excellence framework

It is hard to underestimate quite how negative respondents are about the impacts of the TEF and its subject-level cousin, currently at pilot stage. A handful of senior-level responses are positive about the way in which the metrics-to-medallions exercise has focused attention on teaching and student outcomes. Among other respondent groups, the overriding mood is one of weariness, ranging from the principled (“just kills me, and my spirit”) to the practical (“we’re over-represented by students from low participation neighbourhoods and low paid work”) to the political (“there are too many rumours which suggest that government might wish to ensure that ‘top’ universities do well”).

There is some evidence that the TEF, though painful, is causing a shift in focus. One respondent recalls introducing the concept of student non-continuation and teaching satisfaction to bewildered academic colleagues. More frequently, the sense is that everyone is committed to the cause of improving teaching, but the way the exercise has manifested itself in the day-to-day lives of academic and professional services staff runs counter to the purposes originally envisaged for the TEF.

To some extent, TEF was supposed to act as a replacement for assuring quality through institutional review processes. Responses suggest that it is being received much more as a heavy hand than as a light touch. If the exercise was supposed to focus minds on outcomes more than processes through the metrics embedded into the algorithms, it isn’t working. Few respondents describe innovation in assessment and feedback, or creative new projects to improve employability. Instead there is suspicion and cynicism about the methodology and its efficacy.



The responses also tell a story about how policy initiatives land within institutions. There are plenty of responses that suggest that more senior staff have tended to implement work on the TEF in a way that adds to workloads and wider uncertainty. The concept of policy collusion emerges as a theme: one representative response suggests that “everyone knows” that subject TEF will be costly and give marginal benefit for students, but we “still support it with pilots and have colluded with developing the worse of all worlds methodology.”

Is the exercise salvageable? There are big questions for Dame Shirley Pearce, the former Loughborough vice chancellor currently charged with leading an independent review of the TEF, to resolve. It is not clear that any exercise focused on proxy outcomes rather than inputs and outputs can ever command the confidence of the sector. Government may be tempted to dismiss criticism of the TEF as the howls of change-averse institutions, but the deepening resentment towards the TEF could ultimately derail efforts to improve learning and teaching.

If the sector wishes to shake off the charge of policy collusion, it could take the opportunity of the current independent review to propose a meaningful alternative that retains the goal of raising the profile of learning and teaching for prospective and current students but in ways that are less expensive, intrusive and unpopular.

“

The TEF/NSS just kills me, and my spirit. Does anyone at any university have any confidence at all that their senior management shares their view of the purposes of education? Where? Are they hiring?”

ACADEMIC, PRE-92 UNIVERSITY

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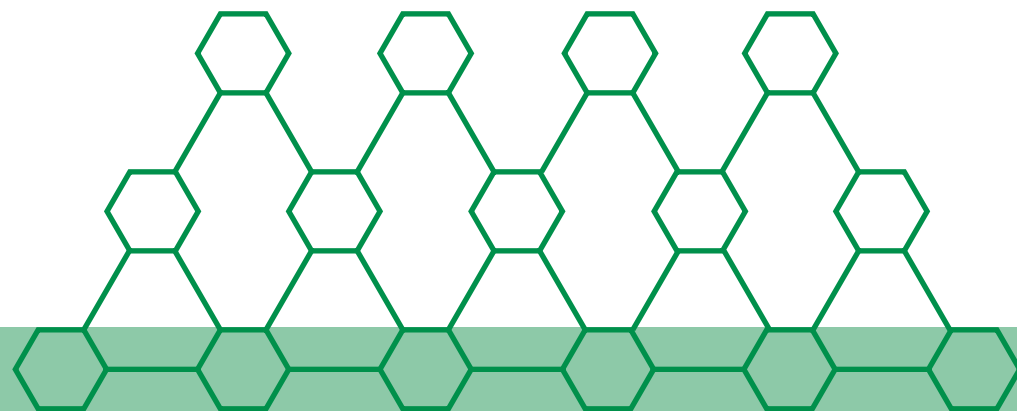
TEF... is based on unreliable or downright fictitious data reinforcing messages generated by made-up league tables designed to sell newspapers.”

ACADEMIC MIDDLE MANAGER, PRE-92 UNIVERSITY

“

I am tired of national figures berating universities for not delivering. I think we do on the whole. The post-92 sector is not complacent in my experience. Subject TEF could be hugely time consuming and wasteful and I am not convinced by the ‘more information for prospective students’ argument.”

SENIOR MANAGER, MODERN UNIVERSITY



Student mental health and wellbeing

Student mental health is a priority for respondents irrespective of their role, level of seniority, or the type of institution they work at. Respondents comment that issues of mental health are considered separately from the related pressures of student fees, accommodation, and “burdensome” academic assessment, leading to a narrow framing of mental health policy approaches within institutions. Without considering the interplay between student mental health and these other factors institutions are at best tackling the surface level causes of student distress rather than its deep-rooted symptoms.

The sector’s policy approaches have involved developing high-level principles for best practice, reflected in Universities UK’s Step Change framework and the emerging Student Mental Health Charter spearheaded by Student Minds. However, the need to increase accountability within the sector and the ways in which data is used to measure and inform improvements to performance are signalled as urgent areas for reform. Respondents also note that more can be done to strengthen partnerships between individual institutions and the NHS, given that mental health requires a whole-of-society approach.

Staff point to feeling overwhelmed at the growing demand of students wanting help and the impact of their inability to meet student needs on their own morale and wellbeing. Some comment that higher education staff have much in common with students in finding the higher education environment stressful, and in not having clear sources of support and advice.

Other respondents cite examples of action undertaken within institutions to address student mental health and wellbeing, including co-producing their mental health strategies with students as partners and training an increased number of mental health first aiders. Students’ unions are also being challenged to think differently about the way they provide support to students.

A need to move from words to action is the clear message here. While principles are helpful they do not achieve much if staff feel ill equipped to support students or if they themselves are struggling to manage their own mental health. There is no appetite for heavy-handed regulatory intervention in this area, so institutions must therefore define for themselves and their students their changing responsibilities and how these will be implemented. Crucially, professionals at all levels need to know which interventions, policies or services will make the most difference.

“

Universities are increasingly stepping in to cover shortages in NHS mental health care and disciplinary action where police forces are stretched.”

PROFESSIONAL SERVICES MIDDLE MANAGER, PRE-92 UNIVERSITY

“

Mental health involves a huge amount of staff time with little ability to cope with the demand. Staff feel rather overwhelmed, and that impacts on morale.”

SENIOR MANAGER, MODERN UNIVERSITY

“

Students are currently re-evaluating what being at university means and the kind of things that universities should be offering them. With student mental health and wellbeing becoming more prominent, students are challenging institutions on this. This is even having an impact on how students unions view themselves. We’re always told that academia is our number one priority, but based on findings, we’re increasingly seeing that mental health support is a number one priority for students.”

STUDENTS’ UNION STAFF MEMBER, MODERN UNIVERSITY

Research

Research remains totemic as a central concern in many parts of the sector. There is a perception among some respondents that it overrides other concerns as an institutional policy priority, with everything from vanity to student recruitment (prospective students look at research-metrics based league tables) given as a reason for this.

Changes to the Research Excellence Framework (REF), particularly the new requirement that all staff defined as research-active are to be submitted, appears to have led in some cases to a review of staff duties and/or additional pressures on staff. One respondent noted a conflict between preparing for REF and delivering teaching enhancements to improve TEF scores.

There was little defence of fundamental research, though some noted that a pressure to be more commercial would be detrimental to “blue skies” activity, and one response noted a need to see community engagement with research. There is even some pushback on the centrality of research: one respondent noted that research is cross-subsidised by teaching, another notes the conflict between institutional prestige and real student need.

The general perception of shrinking budgets, both in general and specifically for research, means that there is an impression of scarcity to add to the mix. However some are looking to the government target of 2.4 per cent of GDP to be invested in research and development by 2027 as a rare positive in an increasingly bleak-looking landscape.

Brexit is clearly tied up with perceptions of the future health of the research base, with collaborative projects, access to funding, and the availability of European staff all up in the air as the sector awaits a clear way forward.

“

My institution has introduced a teaching-only track that they can shunt people who don't produce REFable work to (or who don't produce good enough REFable work).”

ACADEMIC, PRE-92 UNIVERSITY

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The sector, and in particular the post-92 sector, often struggles with a lack of focus on core business (i.e. student experience and teaching), and instead instinctively prioritises research in many areas of resource allocation and business decisions. This is partly driven by academic instinct and also by the draw of institutional prestige, which is often divorced from real student need.”

STAFF MEMBER, MODERN UNIVERSITY

“

My institution is one of those that's just starting to take student education, and leadership/management, seriously as promotion routes etc. That's great. Snobbery about 'research is the only thing that counts' is very deeply ingrained in the culture of the profession. Actually not all the reasons for that are bad reasons (for creative workers, time spent on creative activity is not exchangeable for any other good) - but it has persistent corrosive effects.”

ACADEMIC MIDDLE MANAGER, PRE-92 UNIVERSITY



NATIONAL POLICY ENGAGEMENT

Criticism of policy issues need not be cause for alarm; policy debate thrives on criticality, and we all have political and ideological lenses that we bring to bear on policy. But it was striking the degree to which the Wonk Panel survey respondents characterised the national debate and policy making infrastructure itself as being deeply flawed.

Criticisms levelled at national higher education policy architecture was that it is frequently incoherent, favours media-friendly style over substance, pursues short-term wins at the expense of long-term impact, and crucially, does not engage with the views and expertise of the individuals who work in higher education. Several respondents, when asked for their reflections on national higher education policy simply said, “what national higher education policy?”

This view was not universal; a few respondents were positive about the willingness of the Office for Students to engage in dialogue on questions of access and participation, for example. One respondent pointed out that the issues high on the policy agenda, while not the most material, are nonetheless issues of public concern and as such, should lead to meaningful action from the higher education sector.

Yet the overwhelming message was that policy-engaged individuals working in higher education are sceptical about the authenticity of policy interventions - that they are well-conceived and intended to achieve positive effects.

“

OfS must be a critical friend for HE, or be replaced by a body that is. Government should use the enormous and outstanding wisdom and mental capacity within the sector to improve and evolve the sector and not depend on the (usually limited and dogmatic) whim of whoever happens to be Minister for a few months and is looking for a quick policy impact win.”

SENIOR MANAGER, MODERN UNIVERSITY.

“

It feels like it is being developed by those with a very narrow experience of HE and it is furthering divides between types of qualification (eg not parity of esteem) whilst championing equality, and a narrow rationale about what HE is. The policy is style over substance in addressing core issues that remain. It is then placing a large demand on HE from which I feel little value is being derived because of the hyperactivity of policy change and the constant change of minister at the moment!

PROFESSIONAL SERVICES MIDDLE MANAGER, PRE-92 UNIVERSITY.

“

Our league table obsession, government and media led has changed the face of education, it directly impacts on strategy, policy and resourcing and not in a good way. The metrics create a high stakes, risk averse environment where failure is not an option, reputations are considered to be too important. Yet fundamentally this is how we learn, by making mistakes, reflecting and learning, this opportunity has been taken away from school headteachers, college principals and university vice chancellors because their jobs often depend on it!”

PROFESSIONAL SERVICES MIDDLE MANAGER, MODERN UNIVERSITY

“

National leadership has tended to focus on attacking the sector recently, with unhelpful and sensationalist headlines from ministers and regulators on freedom of speech, grade inflation, admissions, bums on seats etc. Unfortunately this polarises views and the responses are not always considered either and many voices attack the government over marketisation, neo-liberalism etc. It would be much better to have a considered and mature discussion about all these issues.”

PROFESSIONAL SERVICES STAFF MEMBER, MODERN UNIVERSITY

Addressing barriers to policy engagement

There is a school of thought that says that if the objects of policy - the individuals and organisations whose culture and processes are intended to be improved by policy interventions - are critical of the policy, this is only to be expected. Nobody likes change, and if anything, complaints are a sign that the medicine is working. Such a view does not do justice to the knowledge and insight of professionals working in higher education.

Yet even for a policymaker (perhaps understandably) frustrated with the pace of institutional reform in higher education, to fail to appreciate the views, or make use of the knowledge, of the sector is to set out to fail in any attempt to achieve lasting change.

The era of the revolving door between university leaders and the corridors of power is ending. The direct influence of universities on policy - as members of boards of sector organisations, for example - is no longer the dominant model for policymaking in higher education. For those nostalgic about the era of direct influence, it should be noted that that model had significant limitations, in that the policy debate generally took place behind closed doors, among a well-defined group of senior university leaders and sector organisation policy professionals.

The current model of policymaking is much more public, more aggressive, and inevitably, less nuanced, but it opens up a space for deeper and wider engagement in shaping policy among those working at the front line of higher education.

Among our respondents, there was appetite to get more involved in policy but less understanding of how to do this. Some mentioned professional bodies and subject associations as a helpful forum for policy discussion. Others pointed out that simply staying abreast of current policy issues was a significant draw on their time, while one senior manager said that engaging in national policy is “soul destroying.”

It should be noted that much of the architecture of consultation remains in place - national policymaking bodies do consult on policy, and (presumably) do pay some attention to the responses. But these systems are to some extent only open in theory; they require some existing knowledge of policy and typically require a lengthy written response. In other words, they are designed for the policy insider, not for those working on the front line.

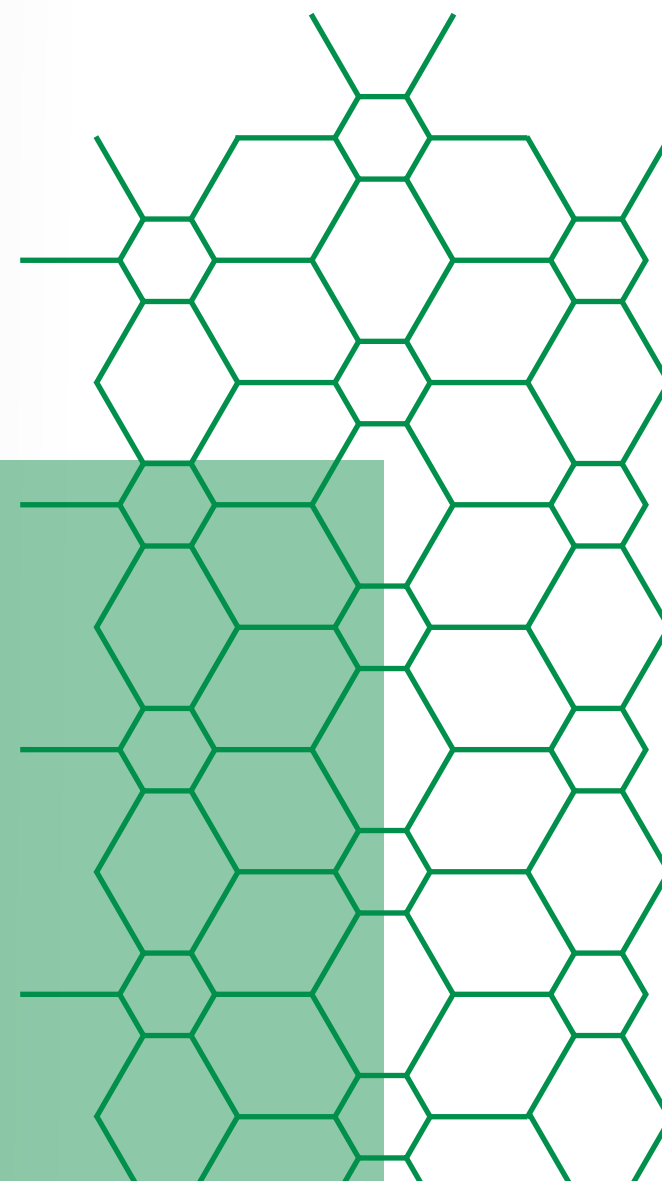
Updating consultation processes would be a start but there are wider issues to address at the policy formation stage, in processes for the development of policy responses within institutions, and the degree of autonomy that universities and those working within them have to interpret policy in ways that make sense locally.

At policy formation stage, the critique is of a top-down approach, with problems and reform agendas conceptualised by those without direct experience of the sector. To some extent this is simply the nature of politics, yet there could be more effort made among policymakers to solicit the views of those working (and studying) in higher education in defining the issues, even before moving on to formulating solutions.

Higher education organisations and individuals could also be more proactive in seeking to inform the development of policy agendas that national policymakers could take ownership of. As one respondent noted, a sector that only wants to be left alone is making itself even more vulnerable to interference.

Within higher education institutions, there could be a more robust policy debate, in response to the agendas of policymakers. Respondents commented that inside institutions the same voices seem to get heard or asked to contribute. Institutions can also be guilty of over-delivering in response to a national policy agenda; interpreting guidance too literally in the hope of securing the approval of policymakers, rather than implementing the policy in a way that suits their context.

National policies themselves could be much more reflective of the diversity of the sector and acknowledge the capabilities of organisations to interpret and implement policies in a way that suits their individual context and constituencies. Much-vaunted institutional autonomy is less the issue here than the simple insight that if policy is to achieve its intended effects, it requires the imagination and buy-in of those who are responsible for implementing it.



“

All the activities are centred around the top-down approach and rarely is there any opportunity or platform for policy development and/or implementation from the bottom-up. There is a sense that policy is made by those who are too far from the front-line to understand contemporary issues and challenges.”

ACADEMIC, MODERN UNIVERSITY

“

I find it difficult and time-consuming to stay informed of policy developments. I also often find coverage of them to be confusing and not easily understood by those new to the HE sector.”

PROFESSIONAL SERVICES STAFF MEMBER, MODERN UNIVERSITY

“

While I feel informed I do not feel fully engaged as researcher views are not often sought.”

ACADEMIC, PRE-92 UNIVERSITY

“

I would welcome more opportunities to be involved in helping to shape policy at a national level, but I don't feel sufficiently aware of the opportunities to do so apart from very irregular consultations.”

STUDENTS' UNION MANAGER, PRE-92 UNIVERSITY

“

There appears to be, as there is across all sectors I have worked in, little recognition of the key role professional/administrative services play in these sort of decision and their implementation. Often, working in the 'centre' places you at an even lower level than your counterparts in academic departments.”

PROFESSIONAL SERVICES MIDDLE MANAGER, PRE-92 UNIVERSITY

WOMEN WHO WONK

A perennial issue for Wonkhe is that we find that while there is no shortage of women working in and thinking about higher education policy, we find that male voices tend to feature more strongly in the policy debate. To explore this issue further we conducted follow-up interviews with some of the women who participated in the Wonk Panel survey to find out what they considered to be issues facing women working in higher education policy at different levels and within different institutions.

Among respondents to the survey there was no significant difference between the extent to which women and men respondents to our survey expressed an aspiration to engage with, shape, or lead policy in their organisation or nationally.

A number of the women we spoke to noticed a lack of representation of women in the highest ranks of policy making in higher education institutions. They said that, as they progressed in their careers, they noticed fewer and fewer women among their peers. One female respondent working at a senior leadership level within an institution said that a lot of the issues facing women in policy come down to representation of women at a senior level:

“Not enough of us hold these senior roles. I don't think there's a case that at this stage there's an issue where we're listened to less, but it's just a case of numbers.”

Several women identified that institutional structures for decision-making can often exclude women. One female respondent working at a senior policy level commented:

“The structures in place are good but they are not often used for the actual decisions. The decisions that are actually made don't happen in those forums. They happen in informal settings. And in the circumstances I am referring to - and I don't know why - this tends to give men an advantage.”

This was echoed by a female policy wonk working at a middle management level:

“I wish policymakers were less secretive. The people making the decisions are trying to get things done but are not being very open or forthcoming as to why or how - and these power games often end up leaving women slightly on the outside.”

Both respondents suggested that using the formal structures that are in place to make these decisions would enable women to play a greater role in policymaking. Yet there is also evidence that women can encounter sexist attitudes and practices in formal decision-making bodies as well. A member of staff working at a senior policy level said:

“I would feel like I had to make a point of calling out - in a jokey way - times I had been interrupted in meetings, which earned me a slightly tongue-in-cheek reputation for being a feminist. I don't think they'd ever experienced that kind of thing before.”

The experiences of our respondents also suggests that there is still some level of gender-based stereotypes when it comes to women working in particular disciplines. We heard this from women who had worked in roles within data and technology development, in particular. One respondent told us:

“There are still very few women working in technology development and related policy areas. That's the part where, as a woman, I have felt isolated, not listened to and spoken down to. I've been prevented from contributing to policy as much as I might want.”

There are a few challenges that are specific to the structures and culture of higher education policy. One female respondent pointed out that higher education policy can be very London-centric. This can exacerbate issues for women with caring responsibilities, who are not as easily able to travel to network:

“Networking is really important in policy. Policy understanding partly comes through reading but partly from chatting and hearing different takes.”

To this point might be added the tendency of the higher education policy sector to conduct much of its networking activity outside of working hours so that anyone with caring responsibilities must choose between professional and family life.

Often, discussions surrounding how to tackle the issues facing women in the workplace revolve around the behaviours of the women themselves. One respondent who works in middle management at a pre-1992 institution said that solving the problem comes down to looking at the workplace as a whole:

“What we need to focus on is an approach that looks at all staff members, not just women. It's important to help women to progress but part of how we do that is by encouraging men to take parental leave.”

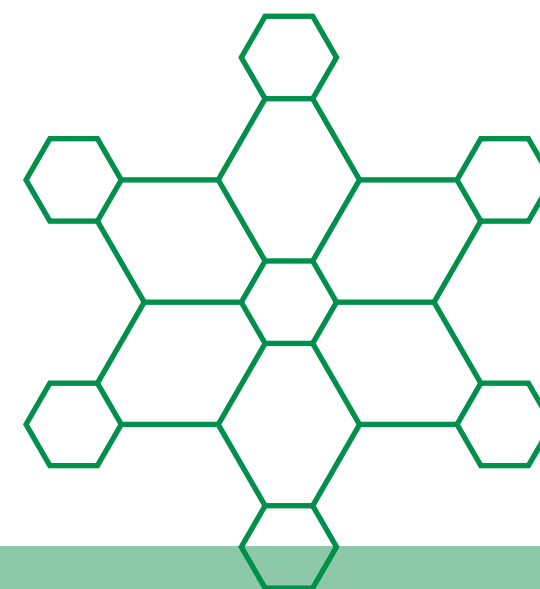
Another respondent also made the point that, to address limitations for women working in the policy space, we need to look beyond the behaviours of the women themselves to the behaviour of those around them:

“There is always a question of whether you fix the structure or you fix the women. I think it's important that women put themselves forward, but that needs to be received on an open plane and not seen as the women being 'pushy' for instance.”

Several women suggested that institutional culture plays an important role in the progress of women in the workplace, and this is shaped most by examples set by those in leadership positions:

“The environment is impacted a lot by those who are in leadership roles. The more openness there is to enlarging the pool of voices, the better.”

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Final reflections

The current policy environment for higher education is extremely turbulent. Higher education organisations are coping with this as best they can, and many respondents are optimistic about the opportunities the future holds and positive about the work they are doing.

Yet there is a lot of frustration in the higher education sector, at the apparent incoherence of national policy, at the apparent lack of understanding of policymakers of the reality of life and work in higher education, and at the lack of clarity about what the future may hold. Confidence in higher education leaders to navigate institutions successfully through challenging times is fragile.

To some extent this Wonkhe 360 report reflects the wider public mood of weariness, and the political paralysis caused by Brexit. Britain, in 2019, does not feel like a country where there is forward momentum or in which citizens can coalesce around a shared agenda.

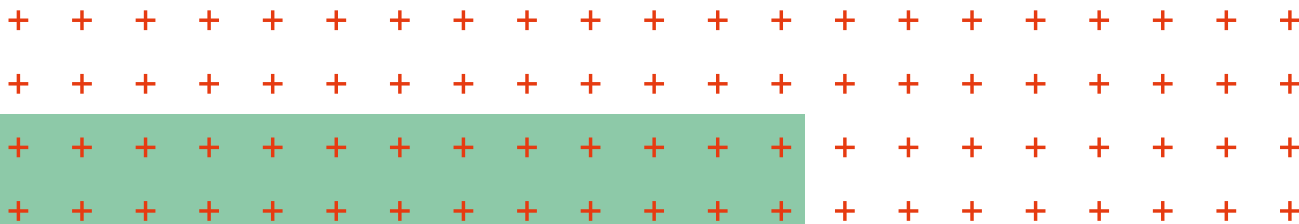
Politicians are fond of saying that higher education is one of our country's great assets. For the higher education sector to find the energy, the imagination and the will to be part of shaping Britain's future post-Brexit, it might be wise for government and national policymakers to reflect on how higher education policymaking can be more inclusive, more flexible, and more focused on the long-term prospects of the sector.

“ There should be more engagement with people from different levels to be able to inform national policy and the formulation of policy should be more democratic and inclusive.”

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“ I think everyone working in HE has a responsibility to comment on, shape and contribute to national HE policy. We cannot be passive recipients of other people's ideological views or ideas of HE. We need to work together to discuss, develop and effectively communicate more nuanced policy rooted in the reality of our student bodies, staff experiences and the day-to-day context of our organisations and the communities they are part of.”

PROFESSIONAL SERVICES MIDDLE MANAGER,
MODERN UNIVERSITY



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