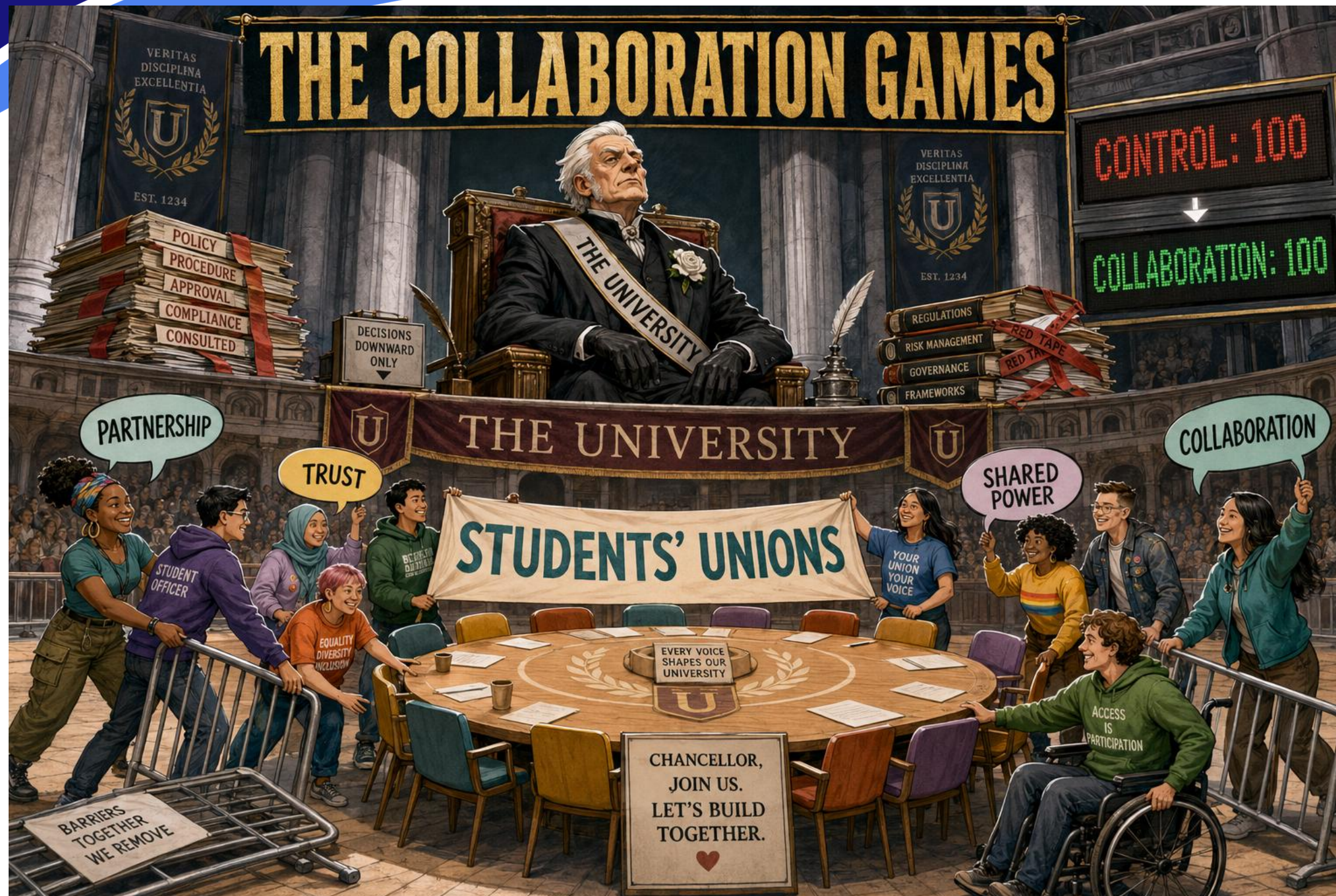




Steve Coole
Founder & Director
Coole Insight



Today's Session: How did we get here?

Date	Development	What it contributed
23-24 Mar 2026	Initial CEO discussion and follow-up	Following the drafting of some articles for Wonkhe Coole Insight convened sector leaders to discuss risk and change readiness of SU's in response to mergers and collaboration. This led to conversations about late SU involvement, unclear starting points and a need for examples, frameworks and scenario thinking. This group has now met four times and is monitoring the development of this work.
13 Apr 2026	First readiness outline	Greenhouse and Coole Insight drafted a light-touch readiness diagnostic covering governance, risk, institutional relationships, organisational capacity, people and culture, with optional scenario and implementation support.
23 Apr 2026	Howden partnership options	Coole Insight proposed joint governance and risk workshops, scenario simulations and sector research, combining governance and decision-making with risk trends, exposure insight and anonymised cases.
28 May-3 Aug 2026	Sector consultation	Fifty-two responses were gathered from a leadership-heavy sample to test awareness, readiness, risks, barriers, support needs and appetite to remain involved.
28 Jul 2026	Strategic readiness reframing	Coole Insight and Greenhouse shifted the focus from merger preparedness to strategic readiness for significant institutional and sector change, with a pilot review as the next practical step.
6 Aug 2026	UUK evidence added which has led to a Coole Insight report and recommendations for the sector to consider.	External evidence reinforced the direction of travel: collaboration, shared services, federations, alliances and merger options are moving further into mainstream university strategy.

Play or be Played? Context Matters

*“Universities UK's 2025 Transformation and Efficiency Taskforce report framed deeper collaboration as a response to sustained financial pressure, highlighting innovative collaborative structures, shared services, leadership and governance as connected areas for action. In May 2026, UUK reported that **65% of universities** were considering federations or alliances and **two in five** were open to or actively considering mergers or acquisitions.”*

This does not mean every SU faces an imminent merger. It does mean that material change in institutional structures, services, funding and decision pathways is increasingly plausible.

UUK Transformation and Efficiency Taskforce
& Coole Insight Analysis

The Consultation Basics

- **52 Students' Union responded.** 49 of which were from CEO or equivalent roles, the other 3 responses were from managers or Directors
- This is an executive judgment; therefore, it is suggested that this becomes a talking and / or **testing point for Trustee Boards**
- The sample **SU's represent approximately 1.05 million students.** 50% of respondents represent between 20,000 – 40,000+ students.
- Not a one size fits all response to this issue. **Union size spanned 2,500 students to over 57,000 students** from small and specialist through to the largest of SU's.
- **Scale should shape response and application, not relevance.** The same readiness question may mean protecting scarce leadership capacity in a smaller SU and managing complexity, campuses or integration in a larger one.

Known Institutional Change Activity

Survey question *To your knowledge, is your institution currently exploring or discussing any form of merger, partnership, or structural change?*

Response	Count	Share
Yes – actively	6	11.5%
Yes – early discussions / informal signals	7	13.5%
Not that we’re aware of	33	63.5%
No – Definitely not	6	11.5%

SU Involvement in University Decision Making

Survey question *Which of the following statements feels most aligned to your SU?*

Response	Count	Share
We are involved early in university decision making	17	32.7%
We tend to hear later in the process, after initial decisions have been made	13	25.0%
We are aware discussions are happening, but we are not involved	11	21.2%
We are not aware of these conversations, and we are kept at arm's length	6	11.5%
Other	5	9.6%

Structural Change in Risk & Strategic Thinking

Survey question *Is institutional structural change (e.g. mergers/partnerships) currently considered in your SU's risk register or strategic thinking?*

Response	Count	Share
Yes – clearly and actively	5	9.6%
Yes – but limited focus / indirectly	17	32.7%
No	27	51.9%
Unsure	3	5.8%

Self-assessed Readiness

Survey question *How prepared do you feel your SU is for significant organisational or institutional change?*

Readiness band (% Readiness score)	Count	Share of valid scores (48/52)
0–25%	11	22.9%
26–50%	13	27.1%
51–75%	18	37.5%
76–100%	6	12.5%

Current Strategic Posture

Survey question *Which of the following best reflects your SU’s current position?*

Response	Count	Share
Actively thinking about future sustainability and different scenarios	30	57.7%
Aware of pressures, but limited structured or strategic planning	18	34.6%
Focused on short-term delivery / immediate priorities	3	5.8%
Unsure	1	1.9%

Biggest Perceived Risk

Survey question *What is the biggest risk to your SU if significant institutional change were to happen?*

Non-exclusive theme	Mentions	Share of valid responses
Financial or resource dependency	28	57.1%
Capacity, delivery or integration	13	26.5%
Influence, access or institutional relationship	12	24.5%
Identity, student voice or representation	10	20.4%
Opportunity profile or limited perceived risk	5	10.2%
Non specific	1	2.0%

Barriers to Strategic Engagement

Survey question *What are the biggest barriers to engaging with this type of strategic thinking right now?*

Recorded selection	Count	Share of all respondents
Time / capacity	32	61.5%
Lack of clarity about what's happening externally	15	28.8%
Not seen as an immediate priority	13	25.0%
Lack of tools / frameworks	4	7.7%
Governance focus is elsewhere	8	15.4%
Cultural resistance / uncertainty	3	5.8%
Other response	17	32.7%

Support SU's would find helpful

Survey question *What would be most helpful in supporting your SU to better understand or prepare for this context? (Select up to 2)*

Recorded selection	Count	Share of all respondents
Practical readiness tools or frameworks	25	48.1%
Clearer sector insight / trends	21	40.4%
Case studies from other SUs	20	38.5%
Space for discussion with peers	20	38.5%
External support / facilitation	10	19.2%
Other response	7	13.5%
No recorded selection	2	3.8%

A Coherent Strategic Picture?

- **Change is present, but incomplete information is more common than confirmed activity.**

One quarter reported active or early discussions, while nearly two thirds were unaware of any in their universities. Preparedness cannot sensibly begin only when a formal proposal arrives.

- **Institutional access is a core readiness asset.**

Only one third reported early involvement following decisions, and only two of the respondents were involved early in the decision making. Arm's-length respondents also reported notably lower readiness scores.

- **Governance practice is the clearest positive indicator in the dataset.**

Readiness rises stepwise as structural change moves from absent, to indirect consideration, to clear and active risk or strategic focus.

- **The dominant exposure is dependency, not merger process.**

Financial and resource risk leads the open-text responses, but it is intertwined with delivery capacity, institutional influence, organisational identity and student voice.

- **Capacity is the main obstacle, and practicality is the main ask.**

Time/capacity dominates barriers; tools, sector insight, examples and peer spaces dominate support preferences.

- **There is permission to continue the conversation.**

Forty respondents may share experience and 51 want updates, providing a broad learning community without assuming that every SU wants the same level of involvement.

Your Union?

What is the one conversation your students' union needs to start now, before significant change is done to you rather than shaped with you?

Tension!

Delivering today for an uncertain tomorrow?

Reduce service delivery today to create the conditions to secure tomorrow?

Thank You

steve@cooleinsightltd.co.uk

07811 305 376

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www.cooleinsightltd.co.uk