



HEPI Annual Review, 2020/21

Summary

The Higher Education Policy Institute is a charity that was established in 2002 'to promote research into and understanding of all aspects of higher education and to disseminate the useful results of such research for the education of policy makers and the general public in the United Kingdom'.

HEPI is funded by higher education institutions and other organisations that wish to see a vibrant higher education policy debate shaped by evidence. We are grateful for this continuing support.

Our engagement with policymakers, the higher education sector, the media, students and the public comes primarily through our reports, our online presence and our events. We look to work collaboratively with other organisations committed to good public policy.

Despite the pandemic, which severely disrupted institutions, staff and students during 2020/21, HEPI was able to maintain its impact at a similar level to the previous record year. Across the full year from August 2020 to July 2021, there were more HEPI publications than in most previous years, a full (virtual) events programme and more engagement with our work online than ever before.

As a specialist body, HEPI is much smaller than most well-known think tanks, yet in late 2020 our work was recognised in the *Prospect* Think Tank of the Year Awards. HEPI was the runner up for the Social Policy Award and the Director was shortlisted for the inaugural Think Tanker of the Year Award.

The small HEPI team is guided by an Advisory Board and is accountable to a Board of Trustees as well as the Charity Commission and other official agencies. In 2020/21, we said goodbye with grateful thanks to one long-serving Trustee, Professor Sir Peter Scott, and welcomed Professor Sally Mapstone in his place. We also welcomed Professor Nick Pearce, Professor Iyiola Solanke and Professor Mary Stuart as new members of the HEPI Advisory Board. Further changes will take place in 2021/22.

In 2020/21, we welcomed Lucy Haire as HEPI's Partnerships and Fundraising Manager and, at the very end of the year, we said goodbye to Rachel Hewitt, HEPI's Director of Policy and Advocacy, who left to become the Chief Executive of MillionPlus, the Association for Modern Universities.

This short Annual Review provides further detail on HEPI's performance in 2020/21, reflecting our continued commitment to transparency on our work.

1. Publications

In 2020/21, HEPI produced 26 pieces of original research:

- six Policy Reports or 'blue books', plus an accompanying online history of student finance;
- six Policy Notes;
- four Debate Papers or 'red books';
- three press releases based on original research not published in other ways;
- three Policy Briefing Papers for HEPI University Partners;
- one detailed Analytical Paper on student accommodation;
- a joint report on perceptions of higher education with the UPP Foundation; and
- the flagship HEPI / Advance HE *Student Academic Experience Survey*.

This year, the *Student Academic Experience Survey* took on a new importance, as it revealed detailed facts about student perceptions in a crisis. Other highlights of the year included: HEPI's first paper on climate change; a detailed look at how student accommodation has changed over recent years; a study on the graduate gender pay gap; an updated study in the HEPI series on likely future demand for higher education, this time with a new regional angle; regular polling of students on the impact of the pandemic; and a new focus on students' personal lives.

Our published output was lower than in the previous year, reflecting lower staffing during the pandemic, but the number of publications was the same as in 2017/18 and higher than in every other year: HEPI produced 34 pieces of original research in 2019/20; 25 in 2018/19; 26 in 2017/18; 18 in 2016/17; 16 in 2015/16; 15 in 2014/15; 10 in 2013/14; and under 10 in each previous year.

2. Events

In 2020/21, HEPI hosted 19 events, either on its own or in conjunction with others, attracting almost 4,000 registered attendees and with many others watching the events afterwards online.

- **the HEPI Annual Conference** on 'Learning from the Crisis', sponsored by Lloyds Bank and UPP, including speeches from the Secretary of State for Education and the Chief Executive of the Office for Students;
- **the HEPI Policy Briefing Day**, including sessions on policymaking, gender and higher education in the media;
- **a half-day conference with HEPI Partner Elsevier** on 'The Research Landscape' with the Minister for Science, Research and Innovation;
- **a party conference event with MillionPlus** with the Minister for Universities;
- **four joint webinars with Partners** on the impact of the crisis and climate change (both with Lloyds Bank), flexible learning (with the QAA) and access to higher education in other European countries (with the European Universities Consortium);
- **three webinars with Advance HE** – a vice-chancellors' question time and sessions on value for money and equality – in place of our regular series of parliamentary events;

- **three webinars with HEPI University Partners** on higher education in the media, social mobility and supporting local communities in the pandemic;
- **two 'In Conversation' events** with the Chief Executive of UCAS;
- **two other webinars** on access and funding, featuring the Director for Fair Access and Participation and a former Minister for Universities and Science; and
- **a Balloon Debate** on the right age to start academic selection, including speeches from a former Secretary of State for Education, the Chief Executive of the Sixth Form Colleges Association and a former Chief Executive of UCAS.

In the previous year, the pandemic had forced us to cancel some of our planned larger events, such as our Annual Conference and our Policy Briefing Day, but in 2020/21 we brought these back online.

It continued to prove impossible to host some of our regular smaller events, such as in-person policy-focused dinners, because of the pandemic. As a result, the total number of HEPI events remained lower than in the two years immediately preceding the pandemic, but we still managed to host more events than HEPI hosted in any year before this.

3. Online activity

In 2020/21, HEPI achieved record engagement online. In late July 2021, we welcomed the two millionth visitor to the HEPI website since the start of the 2015 calendar year. Over the 2020/21 year as a whole, we scored just under 620,000 hits, which is 22% higher than in the previous year, continuing the previous pattern of strong annual growth and reflecting particular interest in posts around the 2020 school-leaving results: there were 510,000 hits in 2019/20, 300,000 in 2018/19, 230,000 in 2017/18, 160,000 in 2016/17 and 130,000 in 2015/16.

There were 267 separate blog entries – more than in any other year. There was a new blog each working day (except between Christmas and new year), plus a small number of weekend entries, with over five times as much new content as in 2015/16: there were 254 entries in 2019/20, 186 in 2018/19, 144 in 2017/18, 60 in 2016/17 and 50 in 2015/16.

Conclusion

In common with other organisations, including higher education institutions and other small charities, HEPI's income took a big hit in 2019/20 while expenditure did not fall so quickly, resulting in a substantial deficit of over £100,000. We responded in 2020/21 by implementing a tough cost-cutting programme and working with a smaller staff team than in other recent years. Our final accounts will show a modest surplus for 2020/21 and HEPI remains financially healthy, with reserves in line with the Charity Commission's recommendations. However, the organisation remains financially weaker than it was before the pandemic.