

Annual Review

2021/22

This year marks 20 years since HEPI was established – as the first independent higher education think tank in the UK. In its two decades of work, HEPI has made a major contribution to the sector and its reports continue to shape the future of higher education for the better. It is willing to entertain voices from across a broad spectrum of opinion and to be a home for debate. HEPI has, of course, also built a reputation as a think tank that values substance and meaningful reform over fads and arbitrary targets.

**The Rt Hon. Michelle Donelan MP, Minister for Higher and Further Education
at the HEPI Annual Conference, June 2022**

Summary

The Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) is an Oxford-based charity that was established in late 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 and benefit 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 very grateful for this continuing support. During 2021/22, the number of HEPI University Partners grew to the highest ever number (130), as did the number of other organisations (15) supporting HEPI through the corporate Partnership programme.

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

Despite the pandemic, which continued to disrupt institutions, and also considerable political upheaval, HEPI was able to maintain its impact and had one of its most successful years in 2021/22. There were more pieces of new HEPI research than in any previous year, with the exception of 2019/20 (when we refocused resources on written content because we had to cancel our in-person events). We hosted a busy and complex events programme that – for the first time – mixed in-person, online and hybrid events. We also entirely revamped our termly Policy Briefing paper to make it more accessible, and we saw record engagement with our work online.

As a specialist body, HEPI is considerably smaller than many other think tanks yet the organisation’s work was recognised in the *Prospect* Think Tank of the Year Awards, when HEPI was shortlisted for the Social Policy Award for the second year running. In May 2022, the National Council of University Professors also recognised our work by making Nick Hillman, HEPI’s Director, an Honorary Fellow in a ceremony in the House of Lords.

The small HEPI staff team is guided by an Advisory Board. In early 2021/22, this was expanded when three new members joined: Professor Nick Pearce; Professor Iyiola Solanke; and Professor Mary Stuart CBE.

HEPI's staff report to the Trustees and, in autumn 2021, we said goodbye with grateful thanks to our dedicated and long-standing Chair, Professor Sir Ivor Crewe, who had served HEPI with distinction for many years. He was replaced as Chair by Professor Sally Mapstone, Principal and Vice-Chancellor of the University of St Andrews. Professor Mapstone received a Damehood for her contribution to higher education in Her Majesty the Queen's 2022 Birthday Honours. Also in 2021/22, Professor Dame Julia Goodfellow left the Advisory Board in order to become a Trustee.

We marked the departure in 2021/22 of Michael Natzler, HEPI's Policy Officer, who moved into higher education consultancy and welcomed both Dr Alexis Brown as HEPI's new Director of Policy and Advocacy and Dr Laura Brassington as HEPI's new Policy Manager.

During the worst of the COVID crisis, HEPI's finances took a big knock and there was a substantial deficit at the end of 2019/20. Since then, the organisation has moved back into a more positive financial position. Looking ahead, HEPI will be affected like every other organisation by the wider economic challenges, including the big increase in inflation, although – to date – HEPI has not increased the standard annual donation from HEPI University Partners since the programme began over a decade ago.

This short Annual Review provides further detail on HEPI's performance in 2021/22, reflecting our long-standing commitment to being significantly more transparent than the majority of UK think tanks, including much bigger organisations.

1. Publications

In 2021/22, HEPI produced 25 pieces of published research, including three issues of the termly Policy Briefing paper, which was entirely revamped in spring 2022. Our published output included 11 analytical HEPI 'blue books', five HEPI Policy Notes, three red HEPI Debate Papers and a range of other publications.

August 2021

a collection of essays on the student voice (produced with support from EvaSys)

September 2021

a study (with Universities UK International and London Economics) on the value of international students to the UK, a report on the state of the humanities and a paper by Lord Willetts on reforming higher education finance

October 2021

a study (with HEPI Partner Kaplan International Pathways) of careers support for international students and another on research and development spending and regional policy (produced with support from HEPI Partner GatenbySanderson)

November 2021

a report on graduates' perceptions of different student finance regimes and a consideration of who owns the rights to recorded lectures

December 2021

a report on the 'One Nation University' (produced with support from the UPP Foundation)

January 2022

a report on first-in-family students

February 2022

a report (with Unite Students) on the experiences of Black students in student accommodation and a detailed study of national security and research

March 2022

a paper on illicit drug use among students and how to react to it, an account of how to define quality in higher education (produced with the Quality Assurance Agency to mark their 25th anniversary) and a study of the low take-up of Chinese Studies among UK students (sponsored by the University of St Andrews)

April 2022

a collection of pieces on the impact of the Government's Level 3 reforms (produced with support from HEPI Partner Pearson)

May 2022

a study of the changing tenure of UK vice-chancellors over time (produced with support from HEPI Partner GatenbySanderson)

June 2022

the annual HEPI / Advance HE student survey and the results of a poll on what students think about free speech

July 2022

a detailed look at the educational experiences of Gypsies, Roma and Travellers (sponsored by the University of Sussex), a report on university governors' responsibilities on academic quality and an account of what more universities might do to help tackle homelessness

In addition to these reports, we featured various other pieces of original research under 'News' on the HEPI website, including: the *2021 HEPI Soft-Power Index* of world leaders educated outside their home country; the annual analysis of recent A-Level results by Mary Curnock Cook; and the *2022 Social Mobility Index*, which is produced in conjunction with London South Bank University.

Looking ahead, we are committed in particular to expanding our output on research, building upon initiatives begun in 2021/22. To this end, in 2021/22 we started various research-related projects for publication in 2022/23, including: a collection of essays on the past, present and future of research assessment and a study of how policymakers conceptualise the value of research.

2. Events

Before COVID, all HEPI events were in-person. When COVID began, many of our events had to be postponed or cancelled and then, in 2020/21, they were all moved online. In 2021/22, however, HEPI hosted a mix of in-person, online and hybrid events, including:

- **five webinars hosted with HEPI Partners and University Partners** on topics such as research spending, Gypsy, Roma and Traveller access to higher education, the experiences of Black students, understanding China and the employability of international students in the UK
- **three dinners hosted in conjunction with HEPI Partners**, on open access, sustainability and homelessness and higher education
- **three HEPI / Advance HE events**, two of which were held online and looked at the future of higher education and inclusivity, and one in the Palace of Westminster on measuring value
- **two HEPI Partner Roundtable Dinners**, one with Clare Marchant of UCAS and another with Matt Western MP, the Shadow Minister for Higher Education, and Professor Nick Pearce
- **the HEPI Annual Conference on 'Challenges for the Future'**, sponsored by UPP, including speeches from the Rt Hon. Minister for Higher and Further Education, Michelle Donelan MP, and the political journalist and experienced university governor, Michael Crick
- **a hybrid Policy Briefing Day** on recent higher education policy developments
- **an online 'In Conversation' event**, with the Executive Chair of Research England, David Sweeney, on the day the Research Excellence Framework results were published
- **a party conference fringe event** with the UPP Foundation on reconnecting universities with the public
- **a briefing for the press** on the results of the HEPI / Advance HE 2022 *Student Academic Experience Survey*

3. Engagement

In 2021/22, HEPI achieved record engagement online. By the end of July 2022, we had received almost 2.5 million recorded website hits since the data began to be collected in a consistent way in 2015. Over the 2021/22 year as a whole, we achieved 682,000 hits, which is nearly 10% higher than in the previous (record) year and nearly double the pre-COVID total. There were just over 250 separate blog entries, with one new piece each working day.

An innovation for 2021/22 was running blog series on specific topics, enabling a deeper dive into topical issues – for example, one blog each Friday for three months on employability (organised with Aston University), a series on the Research Excellence Framework around the time the REF 2021 results appeared and a series on open access research (organised with HEPI Partner Taylor & Francis).

While website hits provide a rough proxy for trends in engagement with HEPI's work, they only capture a minority of interactions. We also publicised our work on a daily basis through direct communications via our electronic database of over 12,000 people, by posting out around 800 hard copies of each major publication to leading people in the higher education sector and beyond, by attending other organisations' events to talk about our work and by working through specialist, local and national media outlets.

4. Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI)

We have put a particular focus this year on improving our record on EDI issues. This has included ensuring more diverse speaker panels than in the past, working harder to ensure a wider mix of authors for our reports and daily blog and also publishing reports on a range of EDI issues.

There were slightly more male (56%) than female (44%) authors of HEPI reports and a similar imbalance among those blogging on the HEPI website (57% male; 43% female). This represented a more even balance than in the past but there is still some distance to travel before reaching parity. In contrast, there were slightly more female speakers (52%) at HEPI events than male speakers (48%), marking a clear change from the past. We generally strive to avoid single-sex panels, but did host one all-male panel and two all-female panels during the year.

Our written output has had a particular focus on a range of EDI issues in 2021/22, including:

- supporting a project run by the Centre for Transforming Access and Student Outcomes in Higher Education (TASO) on the wellbeing of LGBTQ+ students, which was based on data from the HEPI / Advance HE *Student Academic Experience Survey* and launched to coincide with Pride Month;
- working closely with Unite Students on their *Living Black at University* project, which provides the first detailed account of the experience of Black students in purpose-built student accommodation – HEPI supported the report's publication and also hosted the webinar to mark its launch;
- publishing a detailed HEPI study on the outcomes of Gypsies, Roma and Travellers, who are the ethnic minorities most excluded from education, and hosting an accompanying webinar; and
- producing a detailed HEPI report on what universities could do to tackle homelessness, as well as hosting an event with the UPP Foundation on the same topic.

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. In 2020/21, the situation improved – thanks to stringent cost-cutting, including operating with a smaller staff team than in earlier years. As a result, HEPI's final 2020/21 accounts showed a surplus that (including investment returns) was a little larger than the previous year's deficit. However, in financial terms, HEPI remained smaller in 2021/22 than in the years immediately preceding the COVID crisis, with both income and expenditure significantly lower than before the pandemic.

So, broadly speaking, HEPI began 2021/22 in a similar financial position to how it had been on entering the COVID crisis. During the year, income and costs both increased but our final accounts (which are expected to be finalised in early 2023) are likely to show a surplus and the organisation remains financially healthy, with reserves of a sufficient size to protect the organisation against adversity.

The number of institutions that support HEPI's work via the University Partnership and corporate Partnership programmes both grew during the year to the highest totals ever: at the end of 2021/22, there were 130 University Partners and 15 Partners. Increasing the number of institutions with which we work has allowed us to hold down the expected financial contribution towards our work from each one while also enriching our knowledge and diversifying our output.

The positive financial position is not guaranteed to continue into the future. For example, higher inflation is now affecting both HEPI's financial position and the financial sustainability of those that support HEPI's work.

Nick Hillman (Director)
October 2022

HEPI's financial position, 2018/19 to 2020/21



