



Speaker biographies
HEPI Annual Conference
12 June 2025

Speaker biographies (*alphabetical order by surname*)

Professor Nic Beech is the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Salford and was previously Vice-Principal at the University of St Andrews, Provost of Dundee University and Vice-Chancellor of Middlesex University. He is Chair of the Quality Council for UK Higher Education and Treasurer and on the Board of Universities UK. He was previously Treasurer and on the Board of the Academy of Social Sciences and Chair of Access HE. Nic is currently a member of the Secretary of State's Curriculum and Assessment Review panel for England.

Nic's academic field is business and management, and his research focused on identity, change and educational leadership. His awards from Learned Societies include, at a national level, the Lifetime Achievement in Research Award and at an international level, the Exceptional Service to the Field of Management Worldwide Award. He was the longest-serving president of the British Academy of Management.

Professor Nishan Canagarajah is President & Vice-Chancellor at the University of Leicester, an institution which is ranked as a top 25 UK university in the 2025 Times Higher Education World University Rankings and shortlisted as University of the Year 2025 by three independent publications. Born and educated in Sri Lanka, he is a double Cambridge graduate and former Pro Vice-Chancellor at the University of Bristol.

Nishan's appointments to national roles include:

- Board member of [Universities UK](#)
- Board member of the [Higher Education Policy Institute \(HEPI\)](#)
- Chair of Trustees of the [Conversation Trust](#)
- Trustee of [Into University](#)
- Commissioner for the [Midlands Innovation Policy TALENT Policy Commission](#)

Professor Dame Nicola Dandridge is professor of practice in higher education policy at the University of Bristol, where she is researching issues relating to the experience of students, regulation and governance. She is also a Senior Fellow of the M-RCBG Centre at Harvard Kennedy School. Previously she was Chief Executive of the Office for Students, the regulator for higher education in England. Before that, she led Universities UK, the representative body for the UK's universities, and first joined the higher education sector in 2006 as chief executive of the Equality Challenge Unit, established to promote equality and diversity for staff and students in the higher education sector. Nicola originally qualified as a solicitor in both England and Scotland, specialising in industrial relations and equality law.

She is chair of the Council for At Risk Academics, and a member of the boards of the University of Glasgow and of Trinity Laban Conservatoire for Music and Dance.

Josh Freeman is the Policy Manager at HEPI. Previously he worked as a Maths and Politics teacher in London on the Teach First programme. He has since completed a Master's degree in Global Governance and Diplomacy at the University of Oxford. At HEPI, he has recently completed reports on student debating unions and student minimum income needs. His role in HEPI's policy team focuses on policy research and managing the HEPI blog.

James Gray is the Chief Executive at Kortext. He has over 25 years' experience as CEO and director within the digital content industry. He started Kortext in 2012 and in just five years grew the company to be the UK's leading digital textbook and learning platform for higher education. Kortext is the leader in digital textbook solutions for universities and publishers and is leading the HE sectors transition to digital learning. Prior to starting Kortext, James was the owner of Coutts Information Services, which he sold to Ingram Group, where he became CEO of Ingram Digital based out of the USA.

Tessa Griffiths CBE, CEO, Skills England, job-shares with Sarah Maclean. They have worked in a number of senior roles in government including the Cabinet Office, the Equalities and Human Rights Commission, NHS Test & Trace and the DfE, including qualifications and vocational education. They were the Directors of the Skills Strategy from 2022-2025. Sarah and Tessa were awarded CBEs for their work on services to education and the government's covid response.

Susan Lapworth was appointed Chief Executive of the Office for Students (OfS) in September 2022, as the OfS began to deliver its latest strategy, focusing on quality and standards and equality of opportunity. She has the student experience at the heart of her vision for the organisation. Joining the OfS in 2018 as Director of Regulation, Susan was responsible for developing and implementing its regulatory approach to registering and monitoring universities and colleges. She has worked in a range of higher education institutions and has held responsibility for developing institutional strategy and policy, and designing internal regulatory frameworks.

Professor Dame Sally Mapstone DBE FRSE joined the University of St Andrews as Principal and Vice-Chancellor in 2016. She had previously served since 2009 as Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Personnel and Equality and Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Education at the University of Oxford. She is also Convener of Universities Scotland, a board member of Universities UK, a trustee of UCAS and of the Europaeum, and Vice-Chair of the Board of the Carnegie Trust for the Universities of Scotland.

Sally gained her BA and D.Phil. at Oxford, was a Fellow of St Hilda's College (of which she is now an Emeritus Fellow) and Professor of Older Scots Literature in the Faculty of English Language and Literature. She is an expert on the literature of Scotland before 1707 and has published widely on literature both in Scots and in Latin, on political literature and on book history.

Dame Sally was appointed Dame Commander of the Order of the British Empire by Her Majesty the Queen in the Queen's Birthday Honours List for 2022 for services to higher education. She is the current President of Universities UK (UUK) and Chair of the Board of Trustees for HEPI.

Jonathan Neves is Head of Business Intelligence and Surveys. He joined Advance HE in 2015, bringing with him 16 years' experience in customer insight and market research. Jonathan graduated from the University of Liverpool with a degree in Geography, and is a full member of the Market Research Society. Heading up the insights and student surveys portfolio at Advance HE, Jonathan is co-author of the Advance HE / HEPI Student Academic Experience Survey report, and is responsible for the overall strategy for the UK Engagement Survey as well as the Postgraduate Taught and Research Experience Surveys (PTES and PRES).

Dr Jo Saxton CBE became the Chief Executive of UCAS on 15 January 2024, and was previously Chief Regulator of Ofqual from September 2021 until 2024. Jo brings a decade of experience in school leadership

to the role. She has been an education advisor to government and was formerly an academic. Jo was awarded a CBE for services to education in 2024. Jo served as a Trustee of The Brilliant Club, the New Schools Network, and was an Ofqual Board Member from 2018 to 2020. She began her career in academia, and holds qualifications from universities in England and the USA.

Catherine Sezen is Director of Education Policy at the Association of Colleges (AoC). She joined AoC in June 2015 after working in further education for 14 years as a teacher, manager and latterly SLT member. While at college she had responsibility for 14-16 partnership provision including careers, LLDD foundation programmes, English and maths and was 14-19 strategic lead.

Working with a small team, Catherine oversees AoC's Policy work for 16 to 18-year-olds including SEND, careers, digital, student enrichment and qualifications including T levels. Catherine is currently working on the implications of qualification reform and Curriculum and Assessment Review for colleges and their students. She has recently been part of a joint AoC / UCL team undertaking a Nuffield funded project on 14 to 16 provision in colleges and is working on UFI project supporting use of digital technologies in colleges.

Jenny Shaw is HE External Engagement Director for Unite Students, where she leads on national policy research into the student experience, producing influential reports such as Living Black at University and the annual Applicant Index. She has previously led on student experience and student wellbeing for Unite Students, setting up the first student support team in the PBSA sector and contributing to national guidance. She developed the Unite Foundation throughout the 2010s, now a national charity supporting and advocating for care experienced and estranged students. Prior to working with Unite Students she held senior roles in the HE sector, leading on widening access and inclusion. She is currently seconded one day a week to support the work of the Higher Education Mental Health Implementation Taskforce, and has coordinated work on Compassionate Communication, and the Competency Framework for Responding to Students in Distress.

Rose Stephenson is Director of Policy and Advocacy at HEPI. Rose has worked in several aspects of education: online learning, outdoor education and as a teacher and Head of Science in secondary education before moving to the higher education sector. Rose held multiple roles at the University of Bath, overseeing policies and projects relating to the student experience. Rose's role at HEPI focusses on policy; research; analysis; and creating policy recommendations.

Vivienne Stern took up the role of UUK Chief Executive in September 2022. She was previously the Director of Universities UK International (UUKi) which represents UK universities around the world and works to enable them to flourish internationally.

Vivienne has over 20 years' experience of working in higher education policy and politics at national and international level. She is a member of the GREAT Private Sector Council; a Trustee of the Council for At Risk Academics; and a member of the Board of Trade. She was awarded an MBE for Services to International Education in the New Years' Honours List 2022. In 2021 Vivienne received the European Association of International Educators' "Vision and Leadership" award and the PIEoneer "Outstanding Contribution to the Industry" award. Vivienne is a graduate of the University of Cambridge, where she studied English Literature.

Professor Aleks Subic joined Aston University in August 2022 as Vice-Chancellor and Chief Executive. He is a recognised global leader in technology and innovation in higher education, leading on Industry 4.0 strategy and digital transformations across the university sector and with industry and governments both in Australia and internationally. He has received a number of prestigious awards for his work, including the Australian Business Innovation Award and the Victorian Manufacturing Hall of Fame Award.

He is a passionate and lifelong advocate for multiculturalism, equity, diversity and inclusion, leading through clear actions and strategic initiatives at enterprise level. These include creating and appointing the first Dean of STEMM Diversity & Inclusion in Australia, establishing Women in STEMM Fellowships and mentoring scheme, Indigenous Research Fellowships, scholarships and internships programs, and creating an innovation precinct with start-up accelerators and industry incubators focused on founders from diverse backgrounds and access.

Cheryl Watson is a professional with extensive expertise in education technology, business development, and strategic advisory roles. Currently serving as the Vice President of Education, UK at TechnologyOne, Cheryl leads initiatives to enhance digital transformation within higher education institutions, focusing on student experience and operational efficiency. Previously, Cheryl has held multiple leadership positions at several Education Technology providers, driving strategy and market expansion while working closely with institutions to optimise enterprise solutions and gain crucial business benefits.

Lewis Wilson is the Education & Employability Officer at the University of Sussex Students' Union. A recent Law graduate and working-class student, Lewis has been involved in the student movement for almost 4 years, having been a Union Councillor, Student Trustee and President of the Law Society during his time at Sussex. In his current role, Lewis sits on the University Council and works to push for greater access to education but also for greater understanding of students' educational rights entitlement.