# Why Entrepreneurial Leadership Now?

## Edited by Ceri Nursaw


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The National Centre for Entrepreneurship in Education (NCEE) supports universities to be more enterprising and entrepreneurial. As part of this, it delivers entrepreneurial leadership development programmes for higher education. Funded by the sector for the sector, over 300 leaders have been through the NCEE's programmes, which have been rated 'excellent' by 98% of participants.

## About the authors

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# Foreword

**Ceri Nursaw, Chief Executive, NCEE**

At NCEE, we often describe entrepreneurial leadership as 'transformational leadership with limited resources'. This definition feels particularly relevant in the current higher education landscape, where institutions are grappling with constrained budgets, increasing financial uncertainty and the pressure to make difficult decisions about resource allocation. However, being entrepreneurial is not about managing challenges but about finding new and creative ways to deliver value, identifying innovative solutions and ensuring that we continue to serve our students, staff and communities effectively.

Over the past decade, at NCEE we have conducted a higher education leadership survey every two years. We start this collection with the findings of the most recent survey. James Ransom shows there has been a significant shift in the last 18 months: leaders tell us they are now facing unprecedented challenges in generating income, working within tight financial constraints and responding rapidly to an increasingly complex and uncertain environment. As one of the contributors to this collection succinctly puts it: 'It will not get easier'.

This edited collection stems from that survey and brings together reflections from senior leaders across the UK higher education sector – vice-chancellors, pro-vice-chancellors and directors – who are navigating their institutions through these turbulent times. Contributors represent a diverse range of institutions, from research-intensive universities to small and specialist providers, based in rural or urban locations, spanning England, Scotland and Wales. While their contexts differ, their collective insights offer valuable lessons in resilience, adaptability and leadership.

What emerges most powerfully from these essays is not just an acknowledgment of the challenges ahead but a sense of optimism. There is a shared belief in the transformative power of universities and their vital role in supporting society and the economy. Ken Sloan takes this further, advocating for an attitude of 'optimistic tenacity' – a refusal to be risk averse or hesitant and a commitment to embrace the challenges ahead with confidence and ambition.

A key theme is the need to engage beyond our institutional walls. Ken Sloan cautions against being 'suspicious of outsiders', while Adam Doyle argues that universities must adopt a solution-focused, 'outside-in' approach, recognising the difficulties external partners often face in navigating our institutions. Jane Robinson highlights the importance of place, noting that while every region and institution is unique, we should aspire to build a 'new generation of collaborative universities' – ones that prioritise value creation and long-term sustainability.

Andy Salmon expands on this, calling for a reimagined tertiary education model in which universities act as regional convenors – bringing together partners to expand access to higher-level skills and address global challenges through local action. Sara Spear demonstrates how this vision can be realised in practice through community-engaged learning, which integrates academic study with real-world impact.

At the same time, we cannot ignore the rapid evolution of technology. Liz Bacon stresses that 'AI [artificial intelligence] is developing at lightning pace' and argues that it must become central to university strategy if institutions are to remain competitive. Entrepreneurial leadership is therefore not just an option – it is an imperative, and one that must extend across all areas of institutional life.

As Socrates Karidis notes, this requires leadership at all levels. He advocates for greater empowerment and awareness among leaders at every stage of their careers, enabling them to challenge norms, navigate complexity and drive meaningful change. Judith Lamie supports this, as she says it is about people. 'At their very heart are people. It is all about the people, people, don't forget that and you should be just fine.'

Amanda Broderick finds the answer in the entrepreneurial university. She warns that the 'pressures the sector faces are not temporary'. She calls on higher education to adopt 'a disruptive model, already unfolding in response to technological advances that are increasing the speed of knowledge obsolescence.'

Ultimately, our research and this collection of essays point to three essential qualities that will guide us through this period of transformation:

- resilience;
- communication; and
- an entrepreneurial mindset.

These are not just desirable attributes, they are critical for ensuring that our institutions thrive in an increasingly challenging world.

This collection is both a reflection on our current realities and a call to action. As we face the future, we must do so with ambition, agility and the confidence to shape the sector in new and innovative ways.

## Contents

# 1. Pressure, resilience and sustainability: the 2024 NCEE leadership survey

**Dr James Ransom, Head of Research, NCEE**

In November 2024, the National Centre for Entrepreneurship in Education (NCEE) surveyed 32 UK higher education leaders.[1] The survey followed previous analyses of the challenges and opportunities facing leaders and their institutions in 2019 and 2022.[2]

Urgency over university finances dominates. The results suggest one in four (25%) institutions need a 'complete overhaul' to adapt to financial pressures and a further 63% require 'significant changes'. Over 90% of leaders believe their institution will need significant changes to adapt to AI and other emerging technologies. Despite rapidly growing challenges, 7 in 10 leaders (69%) remain confident in their institution's ability to adapt to change and competition.

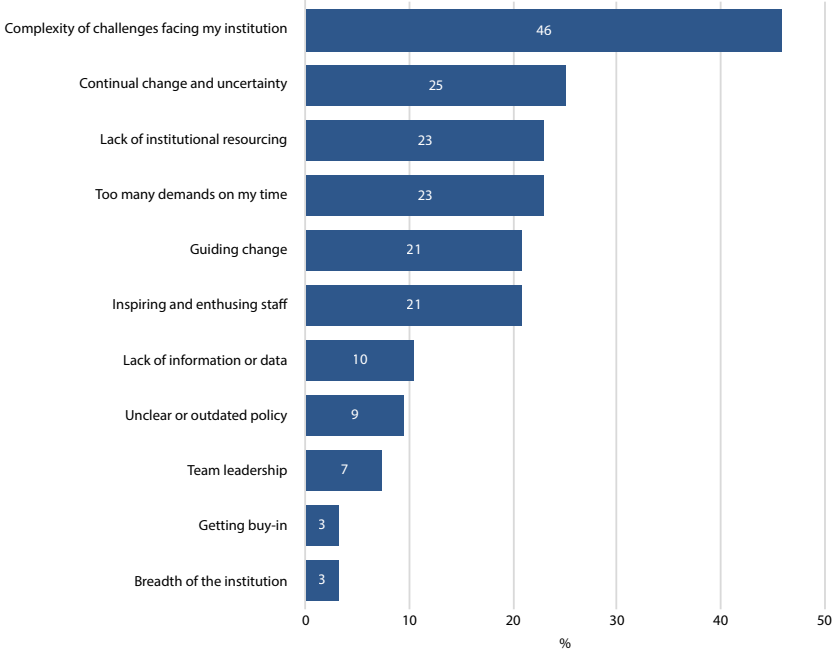
In the first half of the survey, we explore the views of individual leaders. The findings reveal leaders are grappling with complex issues and continual change, with financial pressures top of the agenda. They identify resilience, communication skills and entrepreneurial thinking as crucial leadership capabilities.

In the second half of the survey, we asked leaders to respond on behalf of their institution. Significant change appears to be coming on multiple fronts, but a decline in focus on managing external changes suggests a somewhat more stable policy environment.

*The perspective of higher education leaders*

From a questionnaire menu of options, we asked leaders to identify and rank the top three challenges they face. Figure 1 shows weighted totals: the complexity of issues facing universities is the top challenge (46%), as was the case in our 2019 and 2022 surveys. Continual change and uncertainty ranks second (25%) and also came in the top three in both previous surveys. This means complex challenges and continual change and uncertainty have dominated the agenda of higher education leaders for at least the past five years or so.

*Figure 1: Top challenges faced by leaders*

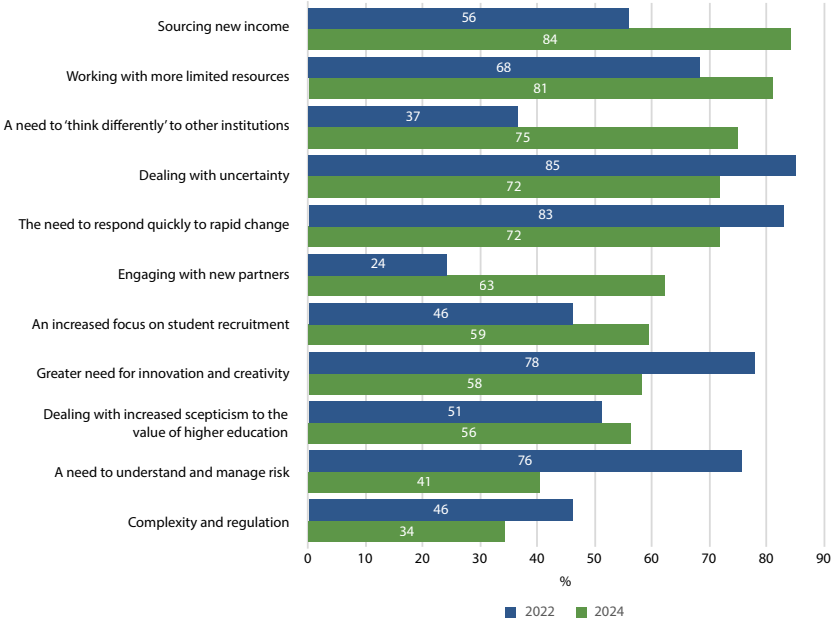



*Leaders ranked the top three challenges they face.*

Internal issues such as leading teams (7%), securing institutional support (3%) and managing broad and diverse organisations (3%) rank lower, suggesting an external focus is dominating – at least from the perspective of senior leaders.

Leaders also reflected on how the nature of leadership has changed over the previous 18 months. Figure 2 shows the factors judged more important over this period and compares these to our 2022 survey. Previously, dealing with uncertainty topped the charts, having intensified since the start of the pandemic. In 2024, financial concerns dominated. Sourcing new income was more important for 84% of leaders and 81% were working with more limited resources.

*Figure 2: How has leadership changed in the last 18 months?*




*Leaders were asked how the nature of leadership had changed over the past 18 months. The graph shows the percentage of respondents who found a factor more important than they had 18 months previously.*

Financial unease is reflected in the respondents' comments:

> *A lot of focus now is on making cuts and driving efficiencies, and there is a need to make staff aware of the seriousness of the financial situation, whilst also trying to protect staff morale and motivation.*
>
> *I have had to make more cuts and be more stringent on spend … there has been retrenching and less openness for innovation and risk.*
>
> *Just completed a major restructure. More may be on the way. Constantly having to scrutinise use of resource – financial, human, time-related.*
>
> *I'm looking at external organisations for funding rather than expecting funding to come through student recruitment.*

These financial concerns appear to have displaced policy concerns. There is less of a focus on managing risk, dealing with uncertainty and responding quickly to rapid change than in 2022.

> *Financial concerns appear to have displaced policy concerns.*

In our 2019 survey, the list was topped by a need to 'think differently' from other institutions due to increased competition (86%) – not shown on the chart. By 2022, this pressure to stand out was identified by only 37% of respondents. Taken together with a significantly reduced proportion of respondents citing pressure to engage with new partners (from 69% in 2019 to 24% in 2022), this decline suggests leaders were focused on navigating their institutions through the post-COVID turbulence. By contrast, in 2024 both scores rebounded, as growing financial concerns prompted leaders to renew efforts to differentiate their institution.

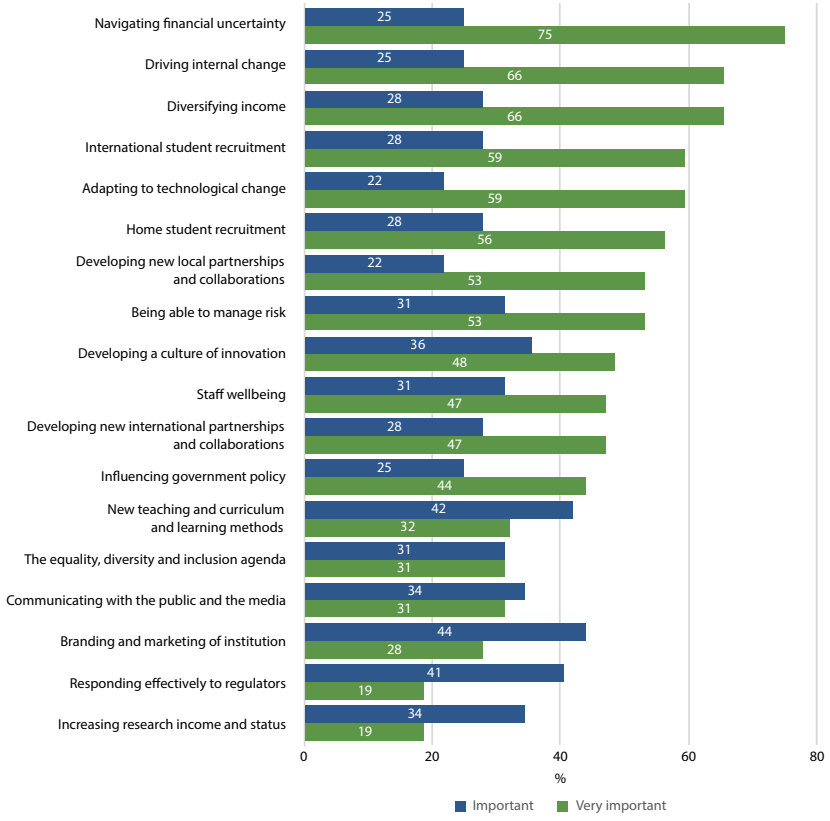
We questioned how important a range of activities would be for higher education leaders over the next few years (Figure 3). Navigating financial uncertainty topped the list (as in both 2019 and 2022): 75% of respondents rated this as very important. In 2022, ensuring staff wellbeing was the second highest priority area, likely reflecting the upheaval of the pandemic. In 2024, driving internal change and diversifying income were near the top: both were rated very important by just over 65% of respondents.

There is little difference between the priority placed on international and home student recruitment, with both ranking highly.

On collaboration, slightly more respondents felt cultivating new local partnerships was important compared to new international partnerships, although the difference is not significant.

Adapting to technological change is the fifth-highest priority: it is 'very important' for 60% of leaders and 'important' for 22%.

*Figure 3: What are the most important activities for institutions?*




*Leaders rated how important different activities are likely to be for higher education leaders over the next couple of years. The graph shows the percentage rated 'important' and 'very important' for each activity.*

We also asked respondents to identify the top skills a higher education leader needs. Resilience was the most-cited capability. Responses emphasise the critical importance of strong communication abilities and an adaptable, entrepreneurial mindset to drive innovation and change.

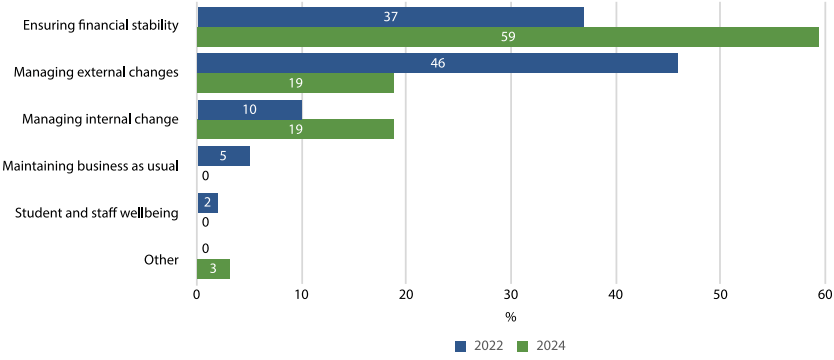
It was noted that leaders must demonstrate emotional intelligence and collaborative approaches, particularly in stakeholder management and

building consensus across diverse groups: 'guiding towards consensus when no one really knows the answer'. This should be complemented by pragmatic business acumen, including strong financial literacy and commercial awareness. Creative thinking and vision feature prominently, alongside the ability to maintain stability while driving innovation – 'calmness in the face of disorder'.

*The institutional view*

Financial stability is the top priority of senior university staff – followed by managing the implications of external changes (from government policy to changing job markets) and managing internal changes in joint second place (Figure 4). This marks a switch between first and second place from 2022. For 59% of leaders, financial stability is viewed as the top institutional priority, compared to 37% in the previous survey cycle. As we also saw in Figure 2, this decline in focus on managing external changes suggests a somewhat more stable policy environment (at least at the time of the survey in November 2024).

*Figure 4: Top institutional priorities*

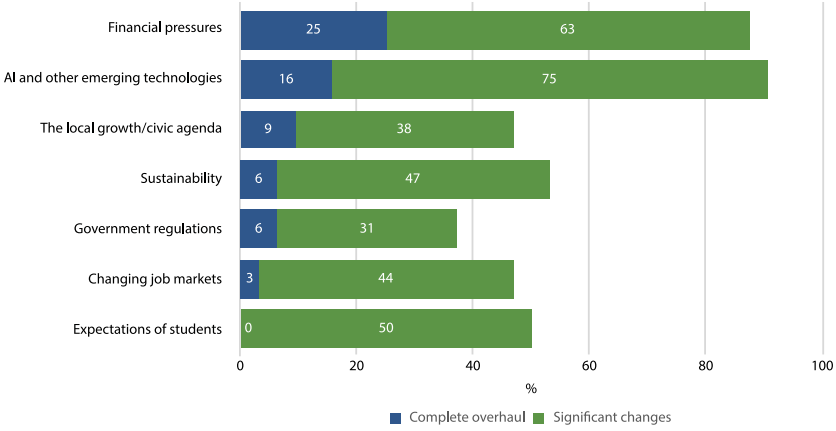



*Leaders picked the top priority for their institution. The graph shows the percentage that picked each option in 2024 (in orange), compared to the response from our 2022 survey (in blue). The one response listed under 'other' (a free text option) is developing the student experience.*

All respondents feel significant change is needed over the next 18 months in at least one of the areas identified in our survey, showing the extent of disruption in the sector (Figure 5). Nine in ten leaders (88%) said their

institution will need significant changes or a complete overhaul to adapt to financial pressures, up from 81% in 2022. However, the proportion who believe a complete overhaul is needed has increased fivefold – from 5% to 25%.

*Figure 5: How will institutions need to change in the next 18 months?*




*Leaders rated how their institution will need to change over the next 18 months to adapt to different agenda. The chart shows the percentage of respondents who selected 'complete overhaul needed' first, with 'significant changes needed' shown on top for each option.*

A big majority of leaders (91%) believe their institution will need a complete overhaul or significant changes over the next 18 months to adapt to AI and other emerging technologies. The rest think minor changes are sufficient.

Over half (53%) report change is needed to meet the sustainability agenda. However, the proportion of leaders who said their institution needs significant changes to adapt to government regulations rose between 2019 and 2022 but fell back in 2024. The same pattern applies to responses on the local growth agenda.

Despite reporting that all institutions need to make significant changes, 69% of respondents are confident in the ability of their institution to adapt to change and competition over the next few years. This is a fall from previous surveys (Table 1).

*Table 1: Confidence in ability of institutions to adapt to change*

| | 2019 | 2022 | 2024 |
|---|---|---|---|
| Yes | 80% | 85% | **69%** |
| No | 2% | 0% | **6%** |
| I'm not sure | 18% | 15% | **25%** |

*Leaders rated how confident they are in the ability of their institution to adapt to change and competition over the next few years. The table shows the percentage that picked each option, including for NCEE's two previous surveys.*

Finally, we asked leaders what skills they think will be most critical for students over the next 5 to 10 years. Responses strongly emphasise digital competency, with particular focus on AI literacy and the ability to work effectively with emerging technologies. Adaptability and resilience feature prominently, reflecting an understanding that students must be prepared for a rapidly evolving workplace.

Responses highlight the enduring importance of human skills – including communication, emotional intelligence and teamwork – alongside technical capabilities. Similarly, creative problem-solving and critical thinking are viewed as essential, while entrepreneurial mindset and financial literacy also emerge as significant themes. Institutions are delivering these skills through a combination of curriculum integration, experiential learning and targeted support programmes, with several in the process of implementing widespread curriculum redesigns to address these needs.

The 2024 survey reveals a higher education sector under significant pressure, particularly financial, yet one where leaders remain largely confident in their ability to adapt – even as they recognise the need for substantial institutional change and the growing importance of technological and sustainability challenges.

The following chapters explore these themes in depth through first-hand accounts from sector leaders. They examine topics from systems reform and place-based leadership to artificial intelligence and service learning – all of which will shape the future of higher education leadership and determine institutional success.

## 2. Insider? Outsider? Surely it does not matter if it works

**Professor Ken Sloan, Vice-Chancellor and Chief Executive Officer, Harper Adams University**

I suspect every chapter of this publication will start by focusing on the incredible challenges that higher education institutions, their people and their leaders are facing. The starting point for this chapter is no different. The key question it is seeking to address is: what are the limits of insight and experience that institutions are willing to draw on to find a way forward? What should be our driving characteristics?

Recently, I shared my experience of leaving the higher education sector in 2010 for a couple of years to join the multinational service organisation, Serco.[3] I was tasked with examining the appetite for collaborations between institutions and organisations like Serco in order to deliver more efficient and high-quality outcomes. Having had 14 years' experience in higher education, the company saw me as a good conduit for conversations with institutions and I believed the sector would trust me to approach things from an understanding of what mattered and what would not work.

I had engaging and open-minded conversations. Many institutions and groups of institutions were grappling with the challenges they were facing and were willing to engage in courageous and creative ideas. What was surprising is that many individuals and institutions approached the conversations with a degree of suspicion and, in a minority of cases, from a perspective of condescension. They categorised the private sector as having different motives and values and questioned if an aligned approach to partnerships and collaboration could ever work. To an extent, there was a similar misalignment from the private sector perspective: the scale of partnership anticipated by private sector organisations far exceeded what the higher education sector would be willing to contemplate. Private sector leaders also held ill-informed, generalised views about how universities and institutions worked. Unsurprisingly, none of the conversations got as far as producing significant action.

I must admit to being confused at the time. Higher education institutions worked with other sectors across all areas of activity: research; student placements; philanthropy; specialist services; and knowledge transfer.

Yet there seemed to be a real reluctance to consider a role for the private sector in supporting the running and delivery of the core of what higher education institutions do. What was really driving that suspicion? Value misalignment or a fear that the role of leadership would have to change?

*Higher education providers work as integrated and holistic institutions. They will never fulfil their potential unless they are steered and regulated as such.*

Fast forward to 2024, what has changed? First, the financial contexts for many institutions have deteriorated significantly. This has created an urgent need for most to consider their disciplinary portfolios, their service delivery models, how they employ people, how many people they need, where and how they work, what they prioritise and what they stop. This all sits against a background of wondering what AI will and will not make possible. These are complex shifts for a sector which for the past few decades has been growth-focused and where launching and building have been the dominant approaches.

There has also been an overhaul in the approach to regulation. The Office for Students (OfS) have responsibility for ensuring that whatever the changes and restructures enacted by English institutions, students are protected from the negative effects and also that the outcomes expected of institutions across the different regulatory categories are delivered.

We have also seen a split in the funding and government oversight of teaching, research and knowledge exchange. Higher education institutions have always faced in different directions, but currently it can feel like there is not a coherent view from government as to what universities should do and what they are for. In the end, they are not a series of initiatives, programmes and projects. Higher education providers work as integrated and holistic institutions. They will never fulfil their potential unless they are steered and regulated as such.

The other key changes since 2010 have been the expansion of providers of all different shapes and sizes. There are many more private providers, some of which achieve regulatory outcomes on a par with more established institutions.

There have been other changes, but the ones listed above arguably connect most closely to the leadership challenge that most heads of institution and their teams are focused on. I have jumped over the pandemic.

What does the contrast between 2010 and 2024 suggest for institutional leadership now and in the future?

*Acting on warning signs*

All institutions have embraced risk management, but I question the extent to which the words we use to capture risk mitigation can really be seen to address the warning signs that have emerged. It is unquestionable that the turbulent effect of geopolitics has been more prevalent over the past decade. The difference from prior decades is that we have known about it in real-time through all forms of media and communication. Despite this turbulence, it has been assumed the economic and social aspirations which have driven significant expansion in international student numbers would not succumb to this turbulence. Capital plans have still grown expansively and forward looks have been based on continuous growth – until now.[4]

We are witnessing a significant contraction across all types of institution as they recalibrate to a different revenue reality. Does this suggest we need to take risk management even more seriously and road-test our mitigation assumptions more robustly than previously? How many amber lights will it take to act? This is directed as much at regulators as it is at institutional leaders like me.

*Avoiding generalised suspicion of outsiders*

Had institutions been more open in 2010 to considering the possibilities for greater collaboration with other sectors in the development and delivery of what they do, I wonder if the choices available to institutions facing current and urgent challenges might be greater and more accessible than now. We are having to deliver change with urgency and there will be differential levels of capability and capacity to do this. Many providers have been more

open to academic and professional expertise from other sectors and career paths. The 2022 chapter I wrote on outsiders questioned if institutions had genuinely embraced these different perspectives, or whether, in order to succeed, these outsiders have had to adopt a more internally palatable approach to how they work.[5]

There will be some examples that negate this. Too often I still hear the language of question and suspicion about the private sector, as if the private sector is homogenous. That suspicion is often directed at private organisations that have registered as higher education institutions. It is time we moved beyond generalisations to call out specific organisations that concern us and be willing to celebrate the ones that are different but are performing well. We must also acknowledge that skilling up our future generations may need a greater range of high-quality institutions and providers than we anticipated a decade or more ago, and some will have approaches we might all benefit from understanding.

*Optimistic tenacity*

From the conversations I have had with fellow leaders in GuildHE, which I chair, I would argue that higher education leaders are inevitably optimistic. How could they not be? Higher education institutions are curators of talent, knowledge, discovery and innovation that will identify and fuel the next generation for our society. Yet they must be tenacious. Higher education institutions are among the most complex organisations to lead. Underpinned by the competitive individuality of how we measure academic performance, combined with the collective collegiality that drives much decision making, and led and organised in a way which secures academic freedom, some aspects feel like contradictory polemics. Yet somehow, they work to make institutions the enriching, rewarding and challenging organisations they are. Somehow, they work.

Optimism and tenacity are essential ingredients for institutional leaders. It will not get easier, the turbulence will not settle, the threats will not diminish, a land of milk and honey will not emerge. We must try to ensure our decision making and our choices come from a place of optimism for what our institutions can and will contribute to the future of society, its communities and our planet. Without optimistic tenacity our hope will be lost, our decision making may be too timid, our guardrails will be blurred

and confused, and we will risk changing fundamentally what our sector is for and what it can contribute. We know major change is happening, some of which is even needed. We need the optimistic tenacity to ensure we do not buckle under the pressure of being the sector everyone wants, instead of ensuring what emerges is the sector everyone needs.

## 3. Partnering for impact

**Adam Doyle, Associate Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Careers and Employer Engagement), University of East London**

While universities have long been recognised as key civic institutions, their strategic role as leaders within the communities they serve has never been more important. Effective leadership in place requires knowledge and understanding of their communities and the increasingly complex challenges and opportunities within them. At its heart is the ability to foster authentic connections with other core organisations across the public and private sectors. Through doing this, leaders are given recognition that they are inclusive catalysts for relevant and much-needed change. However, as Richard Calvert noted when he was Deputy Vice-Chancellor at Sheffield Hallam University, demonstrating strategic intent and delivering impact requires taking the role seriously in 'sharpening strategic intent, building meaningful partnerships, and seeing through the hard work of measuring, evaluating and lesson learning'.[6] This is also important for credibility as a leader and for making sure there will be an opportunity to engage fully with initiatives for change.

Despite the issues facing higher education as a sector, the trust and regard most people hold for universities make them an obvious leader in place. It is therefore unsurprising they are invited to become members of groups such as the London Anchor Institutions Network.[7] Decades of research and community engagement have led to a wealth of knowledge of community needs, the challenges they face and the policies that are intended to provide support. Meanwhile, government at all levels is increasingly expecting universities to deliver economic growth. In her letter of 4 November

*Despite the issues facing higher education as a sector, the trust and regard most people hold for universities make them an obvious leader in place.*

2024, Bridget Phillipson, the Secretary of State for Education, set universities the explicit tasks of improving economic growth and playing a greater civic role in communities.[8] The London Growth Plan recognises the need to involve universities in identifying and creating growth opportunities across communities.[9]

However, there are obstacles to engagement that must be recognised and overcome. In its *State of the Relationship Report 2024*, the National Centre for Universities and Business (NCUB) identified a 5% decrease in the number of university-to-business interactions in 2022/23.[10] Within this, there was a 3.5% fall in the number of university interactions with small- and medium-sized enterprises and an 8.8% fall with large businesses. Meanwhile, universities are increasingly looking at how to diversify their revenue streams and commercialise their assets. In NCEE's Higher Education Leadership Survey 2024, financial concerns dominated the responses (see chapter 1). Sourcing new income is identified as a top priority for 84% of respondents. Ensuring financial stability is also a concern for 59% of institutions.

Ease of collaboration and demonstrating effective return on any investment is essential to encourage engagement with stakeholders and opportunities. My personal experience engaging with organisations of all sizes indicates significant challenges that include:

- a lack of understanding of how universities can support the organisation;
- a lack of clarity on how best to contact universities; and
- enquiries taking too long to progress, made longer by too many contact points.

Remedies to these challenges will provide a step change to an institution's role within its communities and multiply new opportunities available.

Universities have a variety of products and services that can help organisations and communities develop and reach their goals. Avenues for these products and services include research, skills and training, the next generation of graduate talent, technical facilities and associated support and leverage of existing partnerships and connections to support activities.

However, there is a risk of focusing on one specific avenue and unintentionally closing off other options. Effective engagement requires a focus on the complete solution for an organisation rather than considering individual activities. The starting point is absolute clarity on what the organisation wants to achieve, for example gaining a larger market share with a better product. From there, the organisation and university can work back to identify which products and services are required – such as knowledge exchange activity or staff development – to provide a complete solution to an organisation's needs and challenges. For external partners, universities can be difficult institutions to navigate. A solution-focused approach requires a strong 'outside in' mentality. One way of supporting navigation is to place groups of products and services in a hub designed for easier access by external organisations and individuals – the University of East London's Royal Docks Centre for Sustainability provides an example of this approach.[11]

An institution's estate and facilities may be a particularly fertile area for consideration in this context. Estate developments to meet increasingly employer-relevant teaching and learning practice – in particular for the provision of authentic learning experiences – provide an opportunity to think about, and factor in, how the needs of communities and organisations might be served. Practice centres – through which students engage with organisations and members of the public to develop their technical and soft-skill knowledge – are an excellent method of engaging curriculum, research and professional practice for the benefit of the university and external communities. Facilities used in research, with associated technical support, including incubators and related programmes, are increasingly being offered to businesses. These help organisations in their business and product development, testing and certification. Via these types of engagement, the campus becomes a permeable member of its community, underscoring its role in those communities.

Easily accessible conduits for external parties – such as business gateways that facilitate connections within a university – have moved from being nice-to-have to becoming essential instruments for external engagement. It is also essential to have effective account-management processes to maintain a full understanding of the need to engage with, keep abreast of, and support what other leaders in place are doing. Co-location with

other stakeholders can provide a single destination to discuss all aspects of support that are available to an organisation. Stakeholders here include business engagement teams from local authorities and membership groups such as Chambers of Commerce and the Federation of Small Businesses. Co-location facilitates these teams working together more effectively, informing each other of challenges organisations face and forming a deeper understanding of how each can complement the other in providing support. This can inform the need and the strategic direction to assist policy alignment and evaluation of the impact of interventions. The co-location of the University of Derby Business Gateway, Derby City Council's Business Engagement team and East Midlands Chamber of Commerce on university premises shows how this can be successful in driving engagement.[12]

Another big challenge is ensuring frameworks and agreements are in place to create a consistent understanding of what is expected from an activity and how leaders can engage. The coherence of desired outcomes can become muddled when exploring the details. Definitions of success are not always consistent. The sometimes competing aims and subsequent interpretation of policy between institutions and the various levels of government add to this complexity. The challenge for universities is not only being at the table to discuss their role in community development, but also being there at the appropriate time and engaging at various levels of strategy and operation in the partner organisation. Successful engagement with all of these is necessary to achieve alignment.

It is tempting to try and formulate agreements that envisage every possible scenario and create metrics for every activity. But this path brings a risk of disengagement and may lead to impact-opportunity loss through over-engineered documentation that measures output over outcomes. Such agreements can be too rigid to adapt to changing or unexpected circumstances. Instead, agreements should focus on the desired outcomes and *how* investment and activities will create these. Focus can then be placed on delivery of those outcomes, with flexibility in place to adapt to changing circumstances.

A useful method of creating energy for change can be to have all aspects of a university engage with communities and stakeholders on a particular theme for a fixed time. Successful examples include the University of East

London's Year of Science and the Keele Deals.[13] Activities such as free-to-access public lectures, performances, exhibitions and campus tours can facilitate understanding of the work undertaken by a university and showcase how this work benefits communities and organisations and provides collaboration opportunities. Thematic engagement can facilitate a fresh look at designing agreements between parties, overseeing delivery, evaluating engagement and considering future developments. It also provides the opportunity to develop relationships between parts of a university and external stakeholders that may not otherwise take place. Alignment across the theme also maximises impact for public relations, engagement, credibility and relationship building. Through this, fresh perspectives and ideas for long-term and sustainable solutions can be cultivated.

A final consideration is the definition of place. Often looked at from a geographical perspective, it can be beneficial to see an institution's place within the sector from positions of expertise and experience. When considering multi-agency 'wicked problems' such as inequalities, health and social care needs and low productivity, it can help to pool resources and expertise across institutions to build on solutions from individual universities and maximise impact.

Furthermore, different communities often share similar challenges. Consideration of what has been effective elsewhere provides a more efficient use of resources and allows focus for further development and meeting the specific needs within an area. Fellow leaders in place such as the Society of Innovation, Technology and Modernisation and the Scaleup Institute have identified many of these thematic challenges and can facilitate collaboration with those communities. Universities as membership groups – especially those with cross-sector membership, such as London Higher – can use their collective weight as co-leaders in place to advocate for change based on evidence from their activities and engagement. Where universities can identify complementary strengths in resolving problems faced by communities, they can ensure better-informed and sustainable solutions, as well as reinforcing the leading role the sector has in supporting the communities they serve.

## 4. Systems reform based on new models of inclusive growth

**Professor Andy Salmon, Pro-Vice-Chancellor External at Bath Spa University**

Sir David Behan's Independent Review of the Office for Students, *Fit for the Future: Higher Education Regulation Towards 2035*, begins with an identification of the sector's 'polycrisis':

> *Compared to a decade ago, the world is much more volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous. It is understandable that the term 'polycrisis' has entered our vocabulary and looks set to stay with us. The current context is shaped by the global macro trends of climate change, disruptive technology, demographic changes, increasing social instability, and a world that is fracturing under seismic geopolitical shifts. These forces are exerting significant direct and indirect influence on higher education both in the UK and globally.*[14]

In response to these forces, Sir David wasted no time in setting out his stall:

> *As we advance to the middle decades of the 21st century, the question I ask is 'how will higher education develop and what will be the implications for regulation?'. There is a rapidly developing global debate on reimagining the nature and purpose of higher education. This debate is increasingly couched in the context of post-school education and the link between higher and further education – how do both sectors provide the skilled workforce that a post-industrial society will require in the future? The term tertiary education is increasingly used and anticipates diverse pathways for students, with increasing collaboration between higher education providers, and between providers in both the higher education and further education sectors.*[15]

In her recent letter to university leaders, the Secretary of State for Education, Bridget Phillipson, directly references Sir David's review as a blueprint for her higher education priorities of:

i. increased access for disadvantaged people;

ii. stronger contribution to economic growth;

iii. greater civic role;

iv. raising the bar on teaching standards; and

v. greater efficiency leading to system-level reform.

Underneath these headings are some repeat themes:

- an intensified focus on the needs of students and the economy;
- prioritisation of skills and research;
- partnership with local government and employers in placemaking; and
- more rigorous definitions of quality based on this re-evaluation of purpose.

Behind all this, there is to be a fundamental re-examination of business models based on 'far greater collaboration'.[16]

Why a higher education system with over 300 providers that returns £14 for every £1 of government investment and which generates £264 billion for the UK economy should be more collaborative is addressed in Richard Pennycook's Skills England Report, *Driving Growth and Widening Opportunities*.[17] The analysis notes some sub-optimal design features – 'the foremost [of which] is fragmentation'.[18] Linked to this is the 'opacity of navigation' for users and a decline of industry investment, meaning skills shortages affecting 2.5 million roles.[19]

On top of the training and recruitment challenges, there is the long-term effect of skills / capacity mismatches: one in four graduates is in medium to low-skilled employment, 37% of the workforce say they could do more demanding duties and 20% are more qualified than average for their occupation.[20] Furthermore, some 12% of those aged 16-to-24 are NEET (not in education, employment or training), approximately 400,000 people and the equivalent of one year's UK university undergraduate graduation cohort.[21] Finally, the proportion of the workforce not in work, allowing for regional variation, is around 20%.

Taking Behan's, Phillipson's and Pennycook's analyses together, the picture is clear. We have a highly-regarded higher education system, which is successful on many measures, that is in need of reform if it is to address the societal and individual challenges of the future. One could even say the

beleaguered finances of UK universities reflect our slowness in addressing the underlying issues.

New models are required, based on and shaped by:

- an agile response to vocational demand;
- collaborative co-created content; and
- flexible delivery for lifelong-learning participants who will need to make career pivots, given the context of the World Economic Forum's prediction that, over the next five years, nearly a quarter of jobs will change as a result of technological advancements and economic shifts.[22]

This suggests a need for everything to be navigable within one tertiary skills system. And these are just the surface changes! Beneath them we need to address the mega-trends of demographic, technological and green revolutions. By 2050, one in four of the UK population will be over 65.[23] Currently, the fertility rate in England and Wales is 1.44. In technology, STEM-based jobs will grow significantly, but so will human-centred creative roles in an AI world. The impact of green sustainability is still something we struggle to grasp in scope or impact.

New models should be rooted in three principles to address these conundrums.

The first priority is future-facing universities can only really hope to address the opportunity outlined above by becoming regional convenors of national significance. For example, in the last three years, Bath Spa University (BSU) has grown its student population from 8,000 to 30,000, establishing tertiary partnerships in London, Birmingham, Leicester, Leeds and Bristol. Hugely ethnically diverse, 45% mature and studying entirely vocational programmes, the demographic profile for this provision contrasts starkly with

*We need to address the mega-trends of demographic, technological and green revolutions.*

the traditional Bath-based student population. Our commitment is to new models of collaboration. The benefits of widening access will be harnessed in a comprehensive inclusive-growth agenda, designed to create a navigable, transparent, internally and externally beneficial ecosystem that moves fluidly between skills, enterprise, entrepreneurship, competitive knowledge exchange and policy-driving research. This is very much a work in progress. It requires comprehensive structural adaptation to create the necessary fluidity, as we work towards one diverse integrated multi-site community, rather than the usual mothership / satellite model.

The second priority is expanding the higher skills agenda. The agile tertiary skills model envisaged by Skills England moves universities from being primarily two-product providers to a higher skills-based portfolio in anticipation of significant reskilling and upskilling demands. During COVID, BSU formed a Short Course Unit (SCU) that has reskilled and upskilled more than 1,400 adults in 'mega-trend' areas, based on the West of England's chronic skills gaps. In response to industry and regional policy, the SCU co-created short-form courses with the cyber, sustainability and creative industries, as well as courses in agile project management and applied healthcare. The programme is now extending into the Midlands and, via a partnership with the National Institute of Coding, into substantial privately-funded provision.

The statistics in the *Get Britain Working* White Paper are stark: 1.5 million unemployed people; 9 million economically-inactive people; and 2.8 million people who are long-term sick.[24] The skills agenda for contemporary Britain is no longer foundational: it is existential. Certification needs to be driven by building capacity for complex skills. Courses should be co-created, co-delivered and co-assessed with industry and end users across the private, public and tertiary sectors. Given 85% of the 2035 workforce is already employed and the messy patchwork of provision and funding for adult education and the changing nature of international student markets, it is hard to see how our universities can play a full role in the Government's priorities without constructing a higher skills portfolio that has shorter courses at Level 3 and above.

I would suggest that, together, the first and second priorities must be driven by the trans-disciplinary projects that cut to the core of Sir David Behan's polycrisis diagnosis. In partnership with Bath Fashion Museum's world-

leading collection of 100,000 objects, BSU is founding a National Centre for Fashion and Sustainability. In generating £62 billion annually, growing one-and-a-half times quicker than the average economic growth and driving 1 in 25 jobs in the UK, fashion is enormous.[25] It is also responsible for 10% of global carbon emissions (more than all international flights and shipping combined) and 20% of global water pollution.[26] In response to the gargantuan production of 80 billion items of clothing per year, 42% of millennials and 39% of Generation Z are purchasing sustainable products or services.[27] Meanwhile, the West of England has 1,145 sustainable fashion micro-businesses in a region where 92% of the business population is comprised of small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). Furthermore, creative industries account for 30% of this and, of these, 90% employ fewer than 10 people.

The crisis and the antidote sit within the region. Museum, archive, BSU, the local council, combined authority and the fashion industry are united in a public-facing, deeply inclusive yet deeply embedded project. Some 41 of BSU's 49 subject disciplines are involved. Industry engagement is a platform for knowledge exchange and research. Establishing a retail hub in Bath's fashion district will support over 70 sustainable fashion micro-businesses alongside 70 students. Direct, tangible and measurable impacts will address a global polycrisis challenge at a regional level and raise it to national significance.

What co-defines all three priorities is a commitment to inclusive growth as a leadership challenge based on a recognition of the need to 'reimagine the nature and purpose of higher education'.[28] The examples shared from my own University are all works in progress: truthful, tactical and strategic progress. As such, I present them as mini case studies, questions rather than answers. Perhaps the burning need for all of us doing this kind of work is to begin more open and comprehensive cross-university dialogues?

## 5. Leadership in place

**Professor Jane Robinson, Pro-Vice-Chancellor, Engagement & Place, Newcastle University**

Apparently, place is now a thing. Everyone is talking about it – universities, research funding bodies, mayoral combined authorities, even the NHS. But what does it mean for university leadership?

Arguably, the idea that universities play a role in their localities is nothing new – my own institution, Newcastle University, was founded by the pioneers of the Industrial Revolution nearly 200 years ago to train much-needed doctors to improve public health, to innovate and to provide engineers to support the burgeoning local industries that would shape the future economy.

A lot has changed since and our university has evolved, but we have maintained our core mission to benefit society via world-leading research and education. We have demonstrated what the quadruple helix model means in practice – connecting academic, public and private sectors with civil society – and have played a leading role in the civic university movement.

It has been over five years since the UPP Foundation's Civic University Commission report, led by Lord Kerslake, provided a blueprint for strengthening connections between universities and their places.[29] Today, sector leaders are operating in a very different landscape, impacted by a volatile policy environment, an unsustainable funding model and wider geopolitical instability.

It is stating the obvious that universities impact and are impacted by what is happening around them, locally and

> *It is stating the obvious that universities impact and are impacted by what is happening around them, locally and globally. No university is an island.*

globally. No university is an island. But for many university leaders, a disproportionate amount of time is taken up handling day-to-day internal management pressures rather than looking beyond their walls. While this is understandable in the current febrile environment, it is more important than ever to take the time to understand and respond to the external environment.[30] In fact, one could go further to suggest our long-term sustainability actually depends on universities intentionally and visibly benefiting the places in which we operate and the communities we serve, as (largely) publicly-funded organisations.

In many ways, the COVID-19 pandemic shone a spotlight on the vital symbiotic relationship between universities and wider society, most notably the researchers who were able to develop the vaccines which saved so many lives, and the medical students deployed to work on the front line. In local areas, university leaders moved with agility, learning a new language of emergency response. We collaborated with partners in the NHS, local authorities, the voluntary sector and others with a shared and urgent purpose: to mitigate the impact of the pandemic and save lives.

While, thankfully, we have emerged from the pandemic, there has been little respite, with universities (and other partners) operating in an environment which has been described as a permacrisis. We see increasing polarisation in societies, conflicts across the globe, the impact of AI and the dramatic consequences of climate change. Against this backdrop, it is significant that the Labour Government has adopted a mission-led approach – focusing on outcomes by breaking down silos and devolving more to local decision makers. The letter from Education Secretary, Bridget Phillipson, to all vice chancellors after the 2024 Budget made it clear the Government expects universities to play their part, contributing to economic growth, deepening the civic role, creating more and better opportunities for all and delivering efficiencies through collaboration – presenting a clear *quid pro quo*.[31]

For university leaders, this presents challenges and opportunities: balancing the short and long term, dealing with complexity and ambiguity, managing competition and collaboration, sharing experiences and building capabilities. As a sector, we need to support and develop leaders – both now and for the future – by considering some new approaches.

*Develop new models of peer challenge to improve efficiency and effectiveness*

We can learn from other sectors which have dealt with significant change and financial challenge. The Local Government Association have developed a sector-led peer challenge programme, providing insight, guidance and challenge as well as assurance to local and national stakeholders.[32] This offers an invaluable opportunity for institutional leaders to reflect on their strategic goals, review strengths and challenges, share learning and build networks. Universities UK's Transformation and Efficiency Taskforce could link with the Office for Students to develop a programme which would support innovation, share learning and accelerate change.

*Create opportunities for universities and other sectors to improve impact*

By actively supporting secondments and exchanges for both academic and professional service colleagues, we can add diversity of thought and experience, which would help develop an understanding of how places work in practice. For example, Newcastle University's Policy Academy introduces early-career researchers and professional service colleagues to leaders from other sectors.[33] Through Insights North East, a cross-institutional partnership which connects evidence to public policymakers, creating opportunities for researchers to work in government departments and civil servants to spend time in North-East universities, thereby improving evidence-led policymaking and increasing research impact. Working with organisations such as the NCEE and Common Purpose, we can support leaders at all stages of their careers.

*Ensure recruitment and progression extend place-based experience*

Operating in a complex environment and developing innovative approaches to partnerships in place require us to think from the outside in, to understand the drivers, language and culture of our partners. It is important to recognise the value of these boundary-spanning skills and place-based experience in recruitment, reward and recognition policies and in career pathways. Taking a more flexible approach to person specifications – recognising experience outside academia – and engaging external partners in recruitment processes will allow access to a wider pool of talent and experience.

*Develop place-leadership networks to support leaders of the future*

Many of our existing leaders' networks bring together colleagues in traditional functional groups. Coming into higher education in 2019, having worked in local government and the cultural sector, I had much to learn but no obvious peer group. At the time, the appointment of someone with my background into a leadership role was atypical but there is a growing cadre of university leaders with similar roles and wide-ranging experience. While initiatives such as the Civic University Network have provided an important catalyst to civic thinking, I would suggest there is a need for us to build on this with a UK-wide approach to enable us to share learning and inform national policy.[34] We could also build links and add to the growing number of place-based collaborations between universities. Initiatives like Yorkshire Universities and Universities for North East England exemplify how, by collaborating rather than competing, institutions can deliver impact at scale, benefiting the whole country as well as their own bottom lines.

Every place is different – just as every university is different – but there are common themes. We need to spend time understanding our places and what is important to local leaders and communities and we need to articulate clearly how we as universities can contribute. We cannot do it all, but there is a business and moral imperative that we play our part. That presents challenges and opportunities for university leaders as we seek to develop a new generation of collaborative institutions focused on value creation and future sustainability.

## 6. How should we prepare students for the future?

**Sara Spear, Provost and Chief Academic Officer, St Mary's University, Twickenham**

Addressing the global challenges facing society – such as climate change, pandemics and conflict – requires collective effort, from individual consumers and citizens to national governments and international organisations.[35] Generation Z – the group born between 1996 and 2010 and the majority of the current undergraduate population and of much of the postgraduate population too – are reported as being more politically and socially active than their millennial forebears, using technology to power their activism.[36] Higher education can channel this desire for social change, by giving young people the opportunity and tools to reflect on, and engage with, societal issues, now and in the future.

One way to do this is through a pedagogic approach known as service-learning, academic service-learning, community-engaged learning or engaged learning. We use these terms interchangeably, due to their shared focus in combining community engagement, service, academic study and practical experience. This enables experiential learning, benefiting community members and partner organisations as well as students.[37] For example, the Yorkshire Universities *Good Practice Guide for Engaging Students with Sustainability through Service Learning* describes a range of intra- and extra-curricular activities aimed at building engagement in, and commitment to, sustainable practices.[38]

Community-engaged learning can be driven by a faith tradition. St Mary's University, for example, is part of a global network of Roman Catholic universities engaged in service-learning, called Uniservitate.[39] Community-engaged learning at St Mary's includes a law clinic, student-led coaching and work in care homes, among other activities. We have found practical engagement in the service of others is important in helping young people move from the abstract world of promoting causes to creating real relationships while serving society. It helps students better understand the theory in the taught part of their programmes, while developing virtues and habits which can continue to be applied in the service of the community later in life.

While community-engaged learning is often organised at a subject or departmental level, some institutions have embedded it in institutional policy and practice. The Carnegie Classification for Community Engagement acknowledges institutions (predominantly in the United States but now also in Canada and Australia) which partner with the public and private sectors to address critical social issues and contribute to the public good.[40] Cornell University and the Australian Catholic University are among those institutions awarded the classification, with the latter providing a toolkit for educators wanting to engage in service-learning.[41] In an English context, the civic responsibility and commitment that are core to community-engaged learning speak to the Westminster Government's ambitions for higher education institutions to play a greater civic role in their communities, as seen in the letter sent by the UK Education Secretary, Bridget Phillipson, to vice-chancellors in November 2024.[42] An institutional approach to service learning helps when preparing a narrative for the Knowledge Exchange Framework's section on public and community engagement too. Measuring the impact of engagement work on communities is additionally in line with calls from Universities UK to measure more accurately the public benefit delivered by higher education providers.[43]

In leading the (ongoing) journey to embed community-engaged learning at St Mary's University, we have encountered recognised challenges, including gaining buy-in from academic staff across diverse disciplinary areas and building and maintaining relationships with partner organisations.[44] Overcoming these challenges requires impetus and support from senior leadership to make community-engaged learning a core part of the curriculum and student experience and to link with institutional priorities in civic responsibility,

> *There needs to be sufficient flexibility within institutional policies to allow subject areas the freedom to enact engaged learning in the way most suitable for their discipline and student cohorts.*

student employability, research and knowledge exchange. There needs to be sufficient flexibility within institutional policies to allow subject areas the freedom to enact engaged learning in the way most suitable for their discipline and student cohorts. For example, our Creative Arts programmes involve students in local community arts projects, while the Allied Health programmes include placements in hospitals and physiotherapy clinics as well as assistance for charities providing health resources in the community.

Our academic areas maintain relationships with a range of community partners, including contacts in the local authority, NHS and school networks, while records of this activity and partnerships are collated centrally. Community-engaged learning and assessments should be as academically rigorous as traditional methods, with critical and reflective thinking core to the service-learning pedagogy.[45] In promoting service-learning to students, it should be clear how activities will benefit their future employability both through developing transferable skills in collaborating with others and through leading projects. Overall, this approach has resulted in community-engaged learning flourishing at St Mary's, as part of a coherent value proposition for students based on developing the whole person. Based on our experiences and reflections, we provide recommendations for institutionalising community-engaged learning.

*Recommendations for institutions*

i. Consider how community-engaged learning chimes with the institution's mission, values, traditions and sector position.

ii. Embed community-engaged learning within the institution's learning and teaching strategy and / or curriculum framework and require all programmes going through (re)validation to evidence how community-engagement activities are incorporated within the programme.

iii. Provide training for staff in community-engaged learning, including examples of activities both within and beyond the institution in order to foster ideas and innovation in teaching and assessment approaches.

iv. Build community-engaged learning into the institution's employability strategy, preparing students for future work by developing their awareness, understanding and skills in engaging with communities.

v. Include community-engaged learning as part of the widening participation strategy and Access and Participation Plan. Community-engaged learning can provide a diverse set of learning pathways and it is crucial that students are not excluded because of their financial position or caring responsibilities.

vi. Link community-engaged learning to research opportunities for academics, doctoral students and Master's students, fostering inclusiveness and links between research, teaching and knowledge exchange.

vii. Maintain records and evidence of community-engaged learning activities, including the impact this has on both students and communities. Opportunities for critical reflection are crucial for enabling students to consider how the skills, understanding and values developed through community-engaged learning will transcend the individual experience and shape their future interactions with communities and society.

# 7. AI – A leadership imperative

**Professor Liz Bacon, Principal and Vice-Chancellor, Abertay University**

Most university strategies are designed to cover 5 to 10 years. However, the rapid evolution of generative AI should compel us to rethink our priorities. Up to 80% of jobs will incorporate AI capabilities, making AI proficiency essential for staff and students. The ability to 'prompt engineer' – crafting precise inputs to elicit accurate responses – will become a fundamental skill for all.

A major shift in education will be the emergence of personalised AI companion chatbots. These AI-driven assistants can quickly find the exact information a student needs, tailor it to their preferred learning style and guide them through their studies. At a time of funding constraints, AI can manage routine inquiries, allowing staff to focus on the critical, time-intensive and face-to-face support that students require. Beyond answering queries, AI enables personalised learning and intelligent tutoring systems. It can design customised study paths, facilitate interactive and personalised note-taking and create immersive learning experiences. AI-powered translation tools help break language barriers, aiding understanding and fostering global collaboration. Additionally, AI can monitor student behaviour, provide timely interventions, support mental health initiatives and ultimately improve retention rates.

For academics, AI transforms teaching by simplifying lesson planning, research and content creation. It can design inclusive assessments and provide initial grading insights. It can develop thought-provoking challenges and debates, potentially participating as a class member to ensure all angles of a debate are discussed. Predictive AI-driven analytics will identify students at risk, enabling early intervention and targeted support. For researchers, AI tools will support academics through every stage, from identifying gaps in the literature and generating research questions to designing experiments, collecting and analysing data and drafting scholarly outputs – streamlining the entire process.

In university operations, AI can streamline administrative tasks, from automating meeting notes to optimising workflows. Admissions teams can benefit from AI-driven tools that guide applicants through the enrolment

process, providing round-the-clock assistance. AI can prioritise student service requests, ensuring faster response times and reducing bottlenecks. It can also leverage predictive analytics to monitor key performance indicators, identify inefficiencies and recommend improvements, such as flagging delays in processing applications for financial support.

At the senior leadership level, AI can provide real-time data, predictions, forecasting and support for reputation management, for example by listening to media channels. AI will participate in our senior leadership meetings as a critical collaborator, offering innovative solutions, insights and recommendations, acting as a sounding board, uncovering overlooked perspectives and facilitating more informed, faster and more accurate decision making. Universities that integrate AI into governance will gain a competitive edge in a data-driven landscape.

AI is not inherently designed to replace human beings – though that possibility exists – but rather to harness technology to enhance efficiency, support decision-making and unlock new opportunities for innovation, as we have always done, to let people refocus their time and skills on what matters the most.

A critical challenge for universities is their ability to keep pace with the rapid adoption of generative AI in industry. Generative AI is already disrupting business approaches across multiple sectors, so retaining our traditional academic offerings and ways of working, hoping they will remain fit for the future, is simply not an option. To remain competitive, not only within the education sector but also as institutions that serve a vital role in societal learning, AI must be integrated at the heart of all our strategic plans, impacting and shaping every aspect of our business model.

> *While AI may generate savings in the long run, the initial costs may pose a challenge in today's constrained financial environment.*

Given the rapid pace of change, strategies must remain flexible and be regularly reassessed to

ensure continued relevance. This requires leaders to commit to ongoing evaluation and sustained investment in AI solutions. However, the financial investment required is significant. While AI may generate savings in the long run, the initial costs may pose a challenge in today's constrained financial environment. Nevertheless, integrating AI into the student and staff experience is no longer optional – it is essential to staying relevant and cannot be ignored. While leaders may not have every detail mapped out, they must develop a vision for how AI will transform both on-campus and digital experiences.

As with all new technology, there are always trade-offs and challenges. Strong policies on usage are essential and our people need to understand the benefits, the risks and the various controversies surrounding AI.[46] Leaders must navigate the profound impact AI will have on both work and personal life in coming years, an impact likely to surpass that of any previous technological shift in our lifetimes. They will need to balance automation and human judgment, a dynamic that will evolve as AI is entrusted with greater responsibility, particularly with the rise of agentic AI. These systems, which operate with minimal or no human intervention, make intelligent decisions such as providing personalised career guidance to students.

Balancing innovation with ethical concerns such as privacy, transparency and bias presents a big challenge, especially since bias can be difficult to detect, let alone correct. Leaders must carefully consider what access AI will have to staff and student personal data, how it will be used and the measures put in place to ensure its security. Inevitably, some staff and students may resist change or remain sceptical of AI's capabilities. Therefore, reliability and integrity will be crucial, as trust in AI applications can be quickly eroded if issues arise or failures occur. Managing the associated risks is equally paramount, including considerations around ethics and data privacy, so leaders should establish a framework to ensure safe and effective use of AI in the educational environment.

Recognising many staff and students already use AI extensively in their daily lives, a gradual, step-by-step approach, supported by continuous upskilling and training, will help everyone adapt to AI-driven changes and build trust. Collaboration with industry partners can provide insights into how organisations leverage AI, which can inform curriculum development

and better prepare students for a labour market that increasingly relies on these technologies and expects ability to work with AI assistants as a key graduate skill.

By adopting these strategies, institutions can not only embrace the complexities of AI but also position themselves to thrive in this rapidly evolving landscape. Senior management must set the example for how AI will become the new way forward, upskilling both themselves and their teams to embrace the potential and map out clear goals, balancing cost, ethics and the impact on both staff and students, while remaining competitive and ensuring their students are workforce-ready when they graduate.

As with any technological breakthrough, organisations will be equipped to varying degrees in their capacity to tackle the opportunity, with funding, size and culture all coming into play. But it will be the appetite of leaders to embrace the change, rather than the method of delivery, that will ultimately dictate levels of success.

## 8. Leadership in challenging times

**Socrates Karidis, Pro-Vice-Chancellor and CEO, Coventry University London**

The UK higher education sector finds itself in a position that is certainly the most challenging in decades. Organisational sustainability has topped the priority list for most universities and their response ranges from doing nothing to doing all they can to become more attractive, reduce dependencies, increase their levels of efficiency and find alternative sources of revenue. Somewhere in the middle, some institutions are limiting their activity, choosing to be more conservative and contracting to what they see as the core of their mission, which, in their view, is the traditional way of delivering higher education. Regardless of institutional choices on how to face this (not-so-new) reality, in today's sector the effort to survive is no different from what is required to thrive.

No higher education institution is being honest with itself if it does not recognise the need to challenge its norm and change – even the ones that will not report a deficit or run out of cash this year. What kind of change though? And which part of the norm should be challenged? Becoming more corporate, more entrepreneurial, braver in the way they:

- approach efficiency;
- teach differently;
- embrace technology faster and more broadly; and
- introduce new ways of working?

My view is that the answer does not matter as long as the intention is honest and the action is bold!

> *The first step is the recognition that we are slow, siloed and often inefficient organisations with a level of internal resistance to change, which sometimes becomes very difficult, if not impossible, to manage.*

The first step is the recognition that we are slow, siloed and often inefficient organisations with a level of internal resistance to change, which sometimes becomes very difficult, if not impossible, to manage. We often procrastinate and then rush to decisions that are not well thought through, followed by complicated actions performed in an over-simplified way, which then result in sub-optimal outcomes that need to be revisited. Acknowledging this should inform the manner in which we intend to transform ourselves. And then, another question arises: Can transformation come only from the top? Can change be imposed only by senior leadership? Well, I am afraid that once senior leadership steps in, it is probably a bit too late. That leads us to the second step.

The key to transforming higher education institutions can be found in the way we develop leaders, irrespective of leadership level – the way we nurture them into understanding that, regardless of how high or how low they are on the ladder and regardless of how much responsibility they have, leaders need to develop a level of awareness that goes beyond their immediate roles. The levels of institutional, sectoral and systemic understanding a leader possesses are their best qualities. And it is these that are going to be their guide for making optimal decisions. When internal structures are clear and people become confidently aware of their role and its dependencies, the norm can be challenged and changes can be introduced and supported more effectively. Which takes us to step three.

A usual takeaway from many leadership events or discussions is the idea that people in junior and middle management positions should be empowered. I am afraid empowerment in this case is misunderstood for having the freedom to make final decisions (often operational) even with limited understanding of the full picture. Empowerment is welcome, useful and highly effective when it comes alongside the ability to remove oneself from the equation and make decisions after careful consideration of all parameters and risks involved and with full awareness of one's surroundings. It goes beyond communication and dissemination of information. It is about an aspiring leader's thought process.

Empowering staff in complex organisations is difficult and it becomes even more challenging due to the differences in perception between senior leadership and the various layers of management. However, it is a necessary condition for changing at pace and it is not a matter of curbing

resistance but, instead, of unleashing the necessary force that will drive the organisation forward. The predominant view is that people dislike change, but I believe university staff resist change they do not understand – especially when it lacks transparency and does not allow for a clear sense of contribution.

To achieve pace therefore, leaders need the people with them. Leadership must be purposeful and with a clearly articulated sense of direction, where people are able to understand three things.

i. The origin: the current situation at its high level, but also at a level where they can appreciate the effect it is having on their role and function.

ii. The destination: what is the intention of the change and what will it be like when they get there?

iii. The means of getting there: how challenging the process will be, how bumpy the road and how severe the implications.

Of course, devolving responsibility in a meaningful way is key. No change will ever be completed successfully if the people delivering it are not fully behind it. Procedural ownership is vital, as is a safe environment for people to understand, process, challenge and contribute. Staff can be creative, but a mutual trust level that will allow for them to be brought back on track when necessary – without shattering their ability, willingness or energy to try again – is also needed.

For the next couple of years (at least), those who find themselves in a position of leadership at any university will have to understand that, from the operational day-to-day to the medium- or long-term strategic decisions, their actions should be guided by the sustainability requirements of their institution. These will often be costly in political capital and will face a lot of resistance. Leaders, however, must be able to look ahead and push for the changes that will contribute to institutional survival and success – and this is why it is important to ensure that people are on board.

# 9. International higher education leadership: it's all about the people, people!

**Professor Judith Lamie, Pro-Vice-Chancellor for International Engagement, Swansea University**

When I was little, I wanted to be a truck driver. It was the lure of the open road, not a care in the world, driving to exotic and mysterious destinations. It was all about freedom, about the journey, just me and a big truck full of dreams, ambitions and preferably chocolate. Heading out on the open highway, not with a detailed map of where I wanted to go, but a slightly fuzzy picture of where I might want to be heading. Just me, maybe accompanied by the cat, and not averse to meeting a few fellow travellers along the way.

In *The Evolving Nature of Universities*, I explored, with my co-author Christopher Hill, what shapes and influences identity in international higher education (IHE).[47] We critically reflected on the role of IHE and how it impacts a sense of place, identity and engagement within the communities it serves. We looked at this through the lens of the university, the academic, the student and the leader and, in doing so, studied their ambitions and their motivations.

In our lives, we will take many journeys. They do not all begin when we are young or when we are about to leave school, but some of them do. They are not journeys that we necessarily take on our own. Sometimes we take them with other people; occasionally this is by design, frequently it is not.

One thing is for certain: as your journey begins to involve other people, you need to take account of those people, learn from them and maybe even adapt your own views and behaviours as a result. But as a leader, how much can you truly be shaped by those around you? As a leader, do you not need to be clear about who you are and where you want to go? Is it not this which gives those around you stability and a sense of security and confidence in your role and responsibilities as a leader?

They say opposites attract, but in the world of IHE leadership, it may be less about opposites creating harmony and more about the need for us to balance what may appear to be competing priorities. As leaders, we need to focus on the internal challenges of our institutions, while availing ourselves

of external opportunities. We might need to be frugal, but then need to spend. We need to be around for our colleagues to be able to engage with, and we also need to be out there, interacting externally. We need to have a clear vision and be able to articulate that vision, but we must be willing to listen and change. We need to be measured and careful, while at the same time being bold and taking risks. In short, we need to be very very good at juggling.

Leadership in higher education can be like navigating a boat through choppy waters. Over the years, there have been times when the waters have become increasingly rough, with the occasional rapid-like bursts of chaotic turbulence caused not by boulders or fallen trees but by unpredictable and erratic behaviours that affect the stability of the boat or the institution and the various fellow travellers within it. Successfully plotting your route involves various people doing a variety of things (usually at the same time), clarity of roles and responsibilities (with a willingness to roll up your sleeves and help out elsewhere if the situation arises), patience, persistence and, above all, teamwork.

If leading an institution is like guiding a boat through the intricate waterways of your home country, leadership within the international higher education sphere places this on the high seas. Sometimes the seas are smooth and the passage clear, other times less so. You may even find that you have to dock somewhere you had not intended to. Then you will have to deal with different rules and regulations, a different language and cultural and professional mores. You may prefer your way of doing things but that may not be appropriate in this different land. If this is a red line for you, then perhaps you need to carry on your journey, if everyone agrees and if you have the time and the certainty that the next docking point will not have the same sort of demands.

The role of a Pro-Vice-Chancellor International (PVCI) is a familiar but complex one. One activity that a PVCI will lead is the strategic establishment of a university's presence overseas. This can range from small offices to full-blown campuses. These developments require careful planning, clear communication and strong commitment.

Long-term commitment comes in many shapes and sizes and support is pivotal at all levels within the organisation, especially from the leaders. It is

all too easy to give mixed messages both internally and externally. At times of financial pressure, we will likely, for example, be requesting that people scale down what they are doing and be mindful of institutional finances, while simultaneously trying to encourage diversification and the creation of new activity and new income streams.

Not only is this practically a challenge, but it is also confusing for all involved, and can prove to be complex when considering individuals' motivation and feelings. When trying to be frugal, we are probably not feeling at our most positive. New initiatives take time and require enthusiasm. As with most things, one of the most important things for any leader to do is practise what they preach and enable us all to prioritise.

I recently had the opportunity to lead a small university delegation to Kuala Lumpur in Malaysia for the primary purpose of opening Swansea University's first office there. We could simply have sent an email to key contacts informing them of this but instead decided to use the activity as an opportunity to engage with our alumni in the region, meet with current and prospective partners and connect with the relevant government departments and educational agencies.

The launch event, supported by one of our alumni, was extremely well attended: a reflection of the fondness in which they hold their past institution, but also because we had not been there for many years. They talked to us and to each other. Current and new university partners attended the event, as did representatives from the British Council, the British Embassy, industry and government. A schedule had been arranged for the following day, but deliberately the day after had been kept blank so that we could avail ourselves of any opportunities arising. And arise they did, so much so that the final meeting of the trip occurred less than an hour before we headed to the airport. This is important. Of course we want to ensure we all make the most of the time and the travel, but do not be tempted to ram your schedule before you even get there. We were able to have follow-up meetings immediately, which was a way of rolling several trips into one and meant that we could get to know people. Relationships of all shapes and forms take time and we should not underestimate the power of engagement over a brunch, a walk in the park or an evening meal.

We learn about and experience culture in different ways. It is in the history of a place, the language, the food and the people. The more you interact with the culture of your destination, the more you will learn and the more you will understand when situations arise where you find yourself in disagreement. It is perfectly understandable and much easier to deal with if you are empathetic and if you have some shared experiences such as eating durian for the first time. Never to be forgotten and, in the case of one of my colleagues, never to be experienced again either.

*Higher education, international higher education and education more broadly are not merely transactional. At their very heart are people.*

Leadership is a journey where you are treading a unique path. It is a journey of discovery, ambition and self-reflection, and simultaneously a journey of reward and of challenge. But unless you are fulfilling a more solitary childhood ambition, you are not travelling on your own; you are doing so as part of a collective, a team, a crew, a community. The IHE leader is most fortunate. We are able to interact and learn from people all over the world. From people in the next room to people on the other side of the planet. Higher education, international higher education and education more broadly are not merely transactional. At their very heart are people. It is all about the people, people; don't forget that and you should be just fine.

# 10. Degrees of disruption: rewiring universities as economic powerhouses – why universities must embrace entrepreneurial leadership

**Professor Amanda Broderick, Vice-Chancellor and President, University of East London**

Higher education in the UK stands at a pivotal juncture. Financial strain and rapid technological disruption are forcing universities to rethink not just how they operate, but why they exist. In this moment of reckoning, entrepreneurial leadership must move from the margins to the mainstream.

According to the NCEE leadership survey, 88% of UK universities require significant financial change (see chapter 1). Meanwhile, 91% cite AI and emerging technologies as transformational forces. This is not tomorrow's problem; this is today's challenge. As the UK seeks new engines of growth, universities – already major economic contributors – must supercharge their abilities as entrepreneurial powerhouses, accelerating innovation, productivity, talent development and deeper engagement with industry and society.

*The economic opportunity*

Small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) power the UK economy, making up 99.8% of businesses, employing 60% of the workforce and generating £2.8 trillion annually.[48] These businesses need agile, entrepreneurial talent, and universities are central to that supply chain.

Already, one in four UK students starts or plans to start a business while at university, presenting a valuable opportunity to cultivate not only job seekers, but job creators.[49] This phenomenon is not a side-effect of education; it is a strategic outcome. Startups from universities have surged by 70% in the last decade and now employ over 64,000 people – although there are early warning signs of increased barriers to entry with a decrease in the number of new startups and social enterprises in 2024.[50]

Universities have a choice: become incubators and accelerators of productivity, innovation and job creation – or risk irrelevance in an increasingly sceptical yet talent-hungry, tech-driven economy.

*An entrepreneurial transformation*

When I became Vice-Chancellor and President of the University of East London (UEL) in 2018, we launched *Vision 2028* – a 10-year strategy putting careers and entrepreneurship at the heart of the institution. In six years, UEL jumped from ninetieth to second place nationally in the annual numbers of successful graduate startups – proof that there are key strategic drivers that can accelerate innovation.[51]

Our success came from one simple but powerful principle: entrepreneurship must be everyone's business, not just the Business School's.

We embedded entrepreneurial thinking across all disciplines. We focused on practice- and competency-based learning. And we ensured that our students graduate with commercial agility, problem-solving skills and the mindsets employers value.

A strategic entrepreneurial approach can be applied to a university's wider fiduciary responsibilities too. Commercialising research, attracting investment, forging deeper ties with industry and innovating across both horizontal and vertical value chain integration opportunities – all can contribute to longer-term financial sustainability, while supporting regional economic regeneration. The more dynamic, commercially engaged and publicly embedded our institutions become, the stronger our national economic resilience will be.

This is entrepreneurial leadership in action – and any university could adopt it.

*Embedding entrepreneurship institution-wide*

An entrepreneurial university operates at every level:

- curriculum design: embedding entre- and intrapreneurial competencies and enterprise skills across all courses, at all levels;
- industry engagement: building solutions with employers, not just for them;
- research commercialisation: turning knowledge into products and services; and

- flexible educational models: creating access and positive outcomes including through modular, micro, online, in-work and block delivery formats.

We already see a range of entrepreneurial educational innovation across the sector. For example, University Academy 92, co-founded by members of Manchester United's Class of '92 and Lancaster University, integrates employability and personal development alongside academic learning, ensuring graduates are workplace ready.

Salford Business School's six-point and De Montfort University's comprehensive block delivery models also apply fresh approaches to the market, enhancing inclusivity and flexibility and making higher education more accessible to diverse student populations. The expansion of online provision demands more innovative models, such as UEL's 12-point entry for provision with Unicaf, an award-winning transnational education partnership which has been recognised for its championing of diversity, equity and inclusion.[52] And the raft of micro-credentialling and value-added extra certification (see, for example, Southampton Solent University's Certified Practical Artificial Intelligence) have only just started proliferating in advance of the Lifelong Learning Entitlement.

These are not just experiments – they are working models of a new kind of university: connected, commercial and inclusive. Here, *commercial* is not a compromise; it is the foundation of the institution's impact. The future of universities depends on embracing what *commercial* really means: turning ideas into value that serves people and drives progress.

*Situational leadership: a blueprint for change*

Entrepreneurial leadership is not a one-size-fits-all approach. It is deeply contextual and as such requires situational leadership. At UEL, our approach has been to amplify the potential of the opportunities available to us, transforming challenges into catalysts for growth, and moving further, faster – something that leaders can (and must) always apply to their own institutional contexts.

We built the Mental Wealth and Professional Fitness framework into every level of every degree by engaging thousands of employers, designing with industry and community partners from the outset. It ensures our graduates

do not just leave with academic knowledge but with the mindset, competencies and social capital needed to thrive in a fast-changing world. By integrating emotional, social and physical intelligence development, cultural fluency and digital proficiency into the curriculum, we have moved beyond traditional models of graduate attributes towards something more powerful and creative. This model does not just train jobseekers, it develops future-ready leaders.

Rather than backing a handful of large ventures, UEL's enterprise support spreads smaller grants across a diverse pool – including sole traders. We have also launched *BACK:ED*, a pioneering entrepreneurship fund specifically supporting underrepresented founders. The result: 62% of supported startups are led by women and 77% by students who identify from the global ethnic majority. This is inclusive entrepreneurship, and it is working: the estimated turnover of our active firms stands at £7.7 million, an increase of 112% on the 2019/20 figure.

It is vital, however, that schemes such as this do not just give businesses a start – support must be scaffolded to ensure their sustainability. In 2023/24, the number of UEL graduates' active firms surviving more than three years put us in the top 12% of universities nationally.

Thinking contextually also means recognising other points of view – especially when building partnerships. Collaborative research between UK companies and universities has declined since 2019, and we cannot lay blame solely at the door of industry.[53] Whether employers struggle to connect meaningfully with universities or whether there are insufficient incentives to do so, the talent pipeline is only as strong as the partnerships that shape it, and it is incumbent on us all to ensure that partnerships remain attractive and mutually beneficial.

For example, UEL has established a long-term partnership with industry leader Siemens in order to turbocharge our mission to achieve net zero carbon. The partnership focuses on energy reduction and green energy production on UEL campuses and earned us a joint victory at the Decentralised Energy Awards 2023, where we were recognised as the Net Zero Leader of the Year. But to maximise mutual benefit, the partnership extends far beyond our net zero goal. We have also collaborated on:

- a bespoke sustainability certification accessed by more than 5,000 undergraduates;
- biannual hackathons using real-data and industry challenges;
- internship programmes across diverse areas of the business;
- an MSc programme in Sustainable Energy Engineering to support home-based talent to access new opportunities in engineering;
- a live test environment for Siemens software in our Living Lab; and
- a Green Research Chair to invest in future innovations.

By establishing a diverse talent pipeline for the green economy, UEL and Siemens are working together to achieve shared goals – a focus we aspire to every time we develop a new partnership.

*The future belongs to the bold*

Entrepreneurial leadership demands more than rhetoric – it requires bold and timely decisions backed by meaningful action. Too often, institutions get caught in cycles of consultations, pilots and stakeholder engagement without ever making the leap. But credibility comes from follow-through. If we want to build trust with staff, students, partners and the public, we must be willing to act with conviction and resource our commitments accordingly.

One persistent barrier is the pace of change. While the sector is full of innovative thinkers, true transformation – at scale and at pace – has often only materialised in response to global crisis. At UEL, we embraced a full-scale transformation in 2018 – not just to survive, but to lead – to prove higher education's continuing relevance in a volatile world.

*Entrepreneurial leadership demands more than rhetoric – it requires bold and timely decisions backed by meaningful action.*

The pressures the sector faces are not temporary. They are structural

and accelerating. The entrepreneurial university provides us with an answer: a disruptive model, already unfolding in response to technological advances that are increasing the speed of knowledge obsolescence.

Even more than this, it is an economic necessity. In this environment, incrementalism is failure. Universities must lead substantive change intentionally, or risk becoming irrelevant.

*A call to action for employers and policymakers*

This is not a challenge that universities can, or should, tackle alone. Business and government have a critical role to play. We need bold policy decisions and stronger cross-sector alignment. UK employers spend significantly less on training than the EU average, and the gap has widened since 2005.[54] But policymakers must act decisively too. With global financial difficulties forcing industry to rethink its approach to any number of endeavours, action will not happen without support. We need urgent reforms that:

- supercharge university-business collaboration by incentivising businesses to invest in talent development and co-create solutions to national skills shortages, with universities prioritising better business gateways – short-cutting institutional complexity and amplifying co-created value;
- back sustainable investment infrastructure in startups and spin-outs to create growth, innovation and jobs – with policy recognising how to create a step change in output; and
- eliminate bureaucratic roadblocks that prevent universities from developing flexible, industry-led education models – with regulation refocused to navigate both quality and innovation.

At UEL, we contribute over £1 billion to the UK economy annually – a figure which has more than tripled since we started to make the strategic drivers to accelerate innovation an intentional priority.[55] That is the power, pace and impact of an entrepreneurial university. Now, imagine that scaled across the nation.

The future of higher education and the UK's competitive edge rest on how quickly we embrace this shift. Let's stop asking *if* universities should evolve and start asking *how fast* they can.

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**This edited collection of pieces on entrepreneurial leadership brings together reflections from senior leaders at a diverse range of UK higher education institutions who are battling turbulent times.**

**The essays reflect optimism in the transformative power of universities and their ability to support society and the economy.**

**Together, the authors provide a reflection of current realities and serve as a call to action for shaping the sector in new and innovative ways.**


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