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Debate

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Preparing for populism

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1. Setting the scene

May 2026 could mark a major turning point in UK politics. Local elections in England and parliamentary contests in Wales and Scotland will test the mood of the nation. Yet as polling day approaches, patience with the Labour-led government in Westminster is wearing thin and political forecasts are pointing to major gains for Reform UK right across the country. Meanwhile the Greens pushed Labour into third place in the Gorton and Denton by-election of February 2026, at which the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats lost their deposits.

Major parties are scrambling to 'out-Reform' Reform because they recognise a winning political strategy. In our view, the political playbook is changing fast. University public affairs strategists need to adapt, but have yet to find their winning formula.

Higher education is firmly back in the spotlight, though not always on its own terms. Questions about universities' role, purpose and value for money are resurfacing, alongside renewed scrutiny of the student experience and graduate outcomes. In short, the sector's storytelling is about to face its toughest audience yet.

In this context, universities cannot afford to wait and hope for renewed public understanding. The sector is struggling to shape the national conversation and its current posture – defensive and economically reductionist – is alienating its natural sponsors across the political spectrum. It has made a false virtue of its failure to engage with the populist instincts of the time, whether on the left or the right – and it turns out to be surprisingly hard to explain precisely what the sector does.

Yet time is ticking. Universities only have a narrow window in which to engage emerging populist parties before they either enter office or influence those who do. Once that window closes, institutions that stayed silent will not go unnoticed. Those that fail to build relationships early on will find themselves recast not as partners but as convenient enemies.

This cannot be treated as an optional or individual exercise. If some universities hold back, the consequences will fall on the entire sector. We are already seeing this 'bad apple' dynamic at work, as controversies over the rise of MRes degrees and franchised provision in a minority of institutions are being used to cast doubt on the whole sector's quality and integrity. Higher education institutions must therefore act – boldly, publicly and collectively – to rebuild their legitimacy for the populist era that almost certainly lies ahead.

Disclaimer

This report is written not in criticism, but in care. It is a call to action from advocates who believe in the sector's promise but also see its peril. The legitimacy gap facing UK universities is real, but not irreversible. It is a misstep, but not a crisis. What we need now is not another defensive argument for universities, but a reformation and recapturing of their legitimacy: strategic, unapologetically public, inclusive and optimistic. That is what this report sets out to help shape.

2. The need to rebuild confidence in higher education

Public spending is never just about numbers. It is about trust, emotion and values. When universities appear financially fragile, public confidence in higher education tends to falter. That is especially true when political rhetoric frames the sector as needing 'tough love' – whether through free speech mandates or tougher regulation. So how can universities regain credibility and reconnect with the public at a time of economic uncertainty and political volatility?

As authors, we suspect readers of this report are almost certainly already among the policy-savvy few. Their social media feeds are likely full of think-tank papers and regulatory updates. Yet most people encounter universities through very different lenses. Sometimes these can be positive and transformative experiences, such as when receiving care in university hospitals. Outside of this, people are more likely to be exposed to universities through viral outrage over 'woke' academics, headlines about spiralling student debt or even Netflix dramas such as *Saltburn* and *One Day*. Rage, excess and nostalgia are far more gripping than higher education policy reports – and they shape public perceptions of our sector more than any economic impact study ever can.

Perhaps because of this, the data tell a curious story. According to the *Public Perceptions vs Reality* report, published by The Policy Institute at King's College London and HEPI, most people still like the idea of universities.[1] Yet there are also huge gaps in public understanding of what universities do and why they matter. Some blame the media or social media platforms for distorting the picture of our great academic institutions. Others argue that universities should simply 'tell their story better'. But the sector has tried that many times – whether through glossy impact reports, graduate earnings data or countless student success stories. Still, the disconnect persists.

Why is this happening? First, higher education is not a product in the conventional sense. Likewise, universities do not behave like conventional companies in important ways. This means conventional storytelling, marketing

and policy techniques do not always work well. Facts and figures matter, but they rarely shift deeply held expectations. People form views about universities through their experiences – from their friends, employers, local communities and even from their own sense of fairness. Data fades, but expectations endure.

What makes the challenge worse is that universities' arguments are not landing with their core audiences anymore – not even with those closest to them. Consider the five groups whose confidence the sector depends on:

i.   **students and graduates**, questioning the value for money of their courses and the return on investment;

ii. **academics**, disillusioned by managerialism and marketisation;

iii. **business and industry**, concerned about graduate job-readiness and exploring alternative talent pipelines;

iv. **civil society**, worried about inequality and exclusion, seeing half the population as 'left behind;' and

v.   **decision-makers**, across the political parties, sceptical or reluctant to offer the sector their full-throated support.

If higher education is to regain its standing in society, it must first understand why it is losing these core groups, and what can be done about it. We have been told many times that 'narrative is all.'[2] Yet the story the sector has been telling the nation is not working. It is certainly not fit for the populist era that we appear to have entered. Universities are being subtly robbed of something vital – their legitimacy.

Legitimacy is not a given. Institutions earn it through what they do, how they act and how they connect with others. In social science, this is called 'legitimacy management', but the idea is simple. Organisations work for public support in a structured way to uphold their side of the social contract with the British people. They forfeit the right to operate when they fail to meet the values and expectations of the nation, as understood at that point in time.

Public support is a moving target. Society changes its norms from time to time. Then a legitimacy gap opens up and social confidence frays. As we shall suggest in this report, left- and right-wing politicians share an analysis that universities are not keeping their side of the contract.

To reclaim legitimacy, this report argues that universities must manage their standing across three dimensions: **instrumental, moral** and **relational**.[3] This is the story structure the sector has lacked to date – a framework for actions, networks and policy demands. It shows why being good at their core mission of education and research is not enough to make universities popular … yet.

3. Where are we now?

UK universities are facing the most acute financial pressure in a generation. The underlying drivers vary in each part of the country – from the long-term erosion of fee income in England and Wales to flat or declining public funding settlements in Scotland and Northern Ireland. What unites universities across the nation is concern at the widening gap between the real-terms costs of delivering higher education and research and the income institutions receive to do so.

International student fees have helped to bridge that gap over recent years, but that model is now faltering. Latest analysis from the *Times Higher Education* suggests one-third of UK universities have reported deficits so far this year, and institutions are responding with cost-cutting measures, including course closures, property sales and staff reductions.[4] But as this report argues, the current funding squeeze facing UK universities is not the root cause of the sector's troubles. It is the consequence of a deeper collapse in the sector's legitimacy.

Public attitudes toward higher education are complex. Many people have fond memories of their own time at university or hope their children will enrol. Yet they know relatively little about how the sector works in practice and they rank universities low among political priorities.[5]

This leaves politicians in a bind. Universities cost a lot – both for the state and for students – but, in a stagnant economy, they cannot easily be sold as engines of growth or social mobility. Unfortunately, those were the original justifications for the massive increase in public investment in the sector.

As a result, a perception is growing within society that universities have overpromised, underdelivered and lost touch with the values of the communities they serve. The University of Dundee's social purpose drove 'everything we do' until the university went bust.[6] And various universities have had to navigate the gap between their claim to build a better future for all and to change the world, and their decision to make big cuts to the subjects they offer and to their workforce.[7] Vainglorious mission statements are at least easy to fix. It is less

easy to fix the unrealistic structural commitments made by the sector and, much more problematically, by policymakers on its behalf.

Over the last three decades, participation in UK higher education has expanded at speed. Yet, much of the system's design and delivery still mirrors its elite origins. This includes a three-year residential experience and full-time study. Its quality expectations rely on student-to-staff ratios that are unachievably low for large numbers of students. In effect, the sector is selling an elite model at a mass scale – promising the intimacy, individual attention and curated experience of a high-cost luxury good, while operating as a high-volume provider. That fundamental tension between massification and elite design sits at the heart of the sector's crisis of legitimacy and finances. Institutions cannot promise a luxury experience to the many without either diluting their offer or breaking the business model altogether. Until this mismatch is resolved, pressures around quality, cost and public confidence will continue to intensify.

A further sign of misalignment is the sector's continuing hesitation in England around the Lifelong Learning Entitlement (LLE). This could reshape higher education's business model for a world in which learners retrain, reskill and upskill across a lifetime. Many universities remain structurally and culturally unprepared to deliver modular, flexible or transferable provision at scale. Administrative systems, curriculum design, assessment patterns and even campus timetabling continue to assume a traditional, linear student journey rather than facilitate piecemeal engagement.

As Professor Dave Phoenix, Vice-Chancellor of the Open University, has observed, 'There isn't the same belief for many in the power of a university education and the funding model we've got … is recognised as being broken in terms of how it's going to serve the future'.[8] Universities that continue to cling to legacy models risk deepening this crisis of relevance, whereas those that adapt early to the LLE – and indeed to other technological changes – will be far better placed to meet evolving skills needs, stabilise their finances and restore public confidence in the value of higher education.

Perhaps the single biggest example of mismanagement shaping today's higher education crisis in England was not of universities' own making at all.

When policymakers moved the costs of higher education into individual debt in the 2012 fees-and-funding settlement, they made it inevitable that the public would view universities as fat cats charging high fees while their value remained contested. This optic has proved corrosive for trust and legitimacy, particularly as the goalposts have moved around loan rates and conditions.

The design of the system has hard-wired structural problems into the sector. Fees quickly clustered at the cap, the risks of loan outlays and write-offs grew. And subsequent tweaks (such as freezes to repayment thresholds and the abolition of maintenance grants) exposed student 'borrowers' to further financial strain. The result, almost 15 years on, is a system that stores up long-term costs for the state while inflicting growing reputational damage on the sector – not to mention damaging part-time and mature participation in higher education.

In early 2026, this disillusionment is coming to a head through increasingly fraught debates over the cost of Plan 2 student loans, which many now view as both expensive for graduates and unsustainable for the taxpayer.[9] Headlines highlight rising interest on graduates' loan balances, feeding the narrative that higher education imposes a growing financial burden, and graduates feel trapped by the label of 'debt'. Indeed, the language around 'debt' and 'loans' fuels resentment. This hardens the belief that higher education represents poor value for money. It is seen as costly to individuals, costly to the public purse and insufficiently accountable to the country. All this erodes the sector's legitimacy at the moment it needs it most.

When lofty expectations are unmet, the logical corollary is that funding dries up.

Across the political spectrum, universities are viewed with suspicion and are frequently drawn into wider cultural and political battles. Politicians have strong opinions about universities' use of public funds, their internal cultures and their role in national life. Labour accuses universities of having 'lost sight of their responsibility concerning public money.'[10] The Conservatives say, 'these centres of learning risk becoming centres of co-option and intolerance.'[11] Reform UK believes 'allowing political bias or cancel culture must face heavy financial penalties.'[12] Even the Liberal Democrats are calling for a financial review of how the sector is supported in the future.[13]

No surprise, then, that England's regulator, the Office for Students (OfS), has been treating the sector as untrustworthy, with its data-heavy accountability regimes. In Scotland, recent governance failures at the University of Dundee triggered emergency government funding and fierce political criticism – proof that management missteps can invite state intervention, even if disguised as a financial rescue.[14] Scepticism and distrust of higher education is not unique to any one party. It is part of a new political settlement to which the sector must adjust.

Across the country, it is widely held that the higher education sector should prove how effective it is to regain political support. Sector leaders tend to argue the best way to do this is by 'careful, rational, evidenced argument – with a flourish of rhetoric.'[15] They suggest universities should develop 'concerted communications of the reality, which is so much more positive than people think.'[16] Yet evidence and communications are actually part of the sector's problem, as we shall argue later on in this paper.

Most attempts to demonstrate the sector's effectiveness emphasise hard economic facts. These include return on investment, graduate earnings and research impact. In her speech to the 2025 HEPI Annual Conference, Vivienne Stern, CEO of Universities UK (UUK), rightly diagnosed the consequences of 'political distrust and pressure on public finances' as leading to 'the continuing erosion of funding.' She noted that 'the Treasury ignores ... [university] studies on our economic impact,' and she advised the sector to 'work with government to develop a shared understanding of the economic value created by the university system.'[17] Similarly, Wonkhe's *Post-18 Project* argues for 'regulatory levers and incentives to align higher education provision to economic priorities as set out in the government's industrial strategy.'[18]

But here lies the problem. Even with a united front, economic arguments are not clear, interesting or believed. The general public are turned off by them. They weaken support for disciplines – such as the arts and humanities – with limited direct economic impact but immense cultural and civic value to the nation. Worse still, in a slow-growth economy, few believe universities actually drive prosperity. In a recession, even a great education can lead to unemployment.

Populists of all descriptions recognise this weakness. Joseph Heath, author of *Enlightenment 2.0*, points out that 'academics have not done a great job confronting the most confounding aspect of populism, which is that the more it gets criticised by intellectuals, the more powerful it becomes.'[19] He defines populism as an appeal to common sense and a revolt against complex theories. Universities, steeped in complexity, jargon and theories, therefore face a double disadvantage. They speak in ways the public does not understand. And they appeal least to lower-income groups, who already distrust established institutions and are more likely to embrace populist narratives.[20] As Rose Stephenson, HEPI's Director of Policy and Strategy, has said, '27% of the population who hold a medium-level qualification (A-Level or equivalent) ... voted for Reform in the last election. To what extent does this group of voters feel like university is a place for them?'[21]

This double disadvantage partly explains why UK universities have found it so difficult to handle an era of radical political mobilisation. The Brexit referendum in 2016 is often considered the start of an era of extreme views and differences in the UK. Universities have struggled to navigate this divisive environment. As part of the Establishment, they are repeatedly targets of popular movements. Examples include ongoing environmental activism, '#MeToo' from 2014, decolonisation from 2015, Black Lives Matter from 2020, the politicisation of freedom of speech and, since 2023, the unfolding situation in Gaza.

Each of these polarising campaigns came as a nasty surprise to the sector. They divided academic communities and created governance problems, regulatory interest and compliance burdens. But it then became clear they were somehow connected. Perhaps this was a culture war about a specific range of difficult topics? If so, the sector could take comfort that 'most people know very little or nothing' about these topics; and the culture war seemed to be calming down by 2021.[22]

That hope now seems premature. Controversies continue. University boards regularly deal with the consequences of wedge issues. Political parties increasingly use polarising arguments to further their political aims. From the standpoint of 2026, polarisation seems a lot like a wider change in political strategy.[23] This will change policy incentives and erode political consensus. As such, it demands a change in the sector's approach to policy and advocacy.

Reform UK is currently the best-known example in the UK of this changing political strategy, although the same methods are being adopted by other insurgent movements, most notably the Green Party under Zack Polanski. Many commentators expect Reform UK to have great influence in the next general election. Yet even as Reform UK gains political ascendancy, few in the higher education sector are taking its policy signals and speeches seriously. This does not mean endorsing it but adapting university strategy. Universities might, for example, seek to use university research to shape the Reform UK policy agenda and desired solutions. We believe very few academics would tackle this task without disdain and criticism of the party. And those who did engage would fear being shunned by colleagues for helping the political 'other.'

This tension is heightened by new findings from HEPI. Today's student body increasingly resists engagement with right-wing parties.[24] In a HEPI poll, 35 per cent of full-time undergraduate students said Reform UK should be banned from speaking at events held in higher education institutions. This is the highest recorded support for banning any political group in the decade-long research series. And it provides ample evidence of political bias. The same research shows that the Green Party is largely welcome on campus. This sits awkwardly alongside students' simultaneous claims to support free speech in principle and reveals a widening contradiction in the political culture on UK university campuses. It represents an open goal for Reform UK campaigners. They are very much prepared to bait student societies for the sake of a useful news cycle, as at Bangor University in February 2026.[25]

Universities are not seen as neutral in contemporary policymaking. In fact, there is a three-way cultural mismatch. The populist critique treats universities as elitist and politically suspect. The progressive consensus of staff and students confirms these suspicions. And the centrism of university advocacy and policymaking is unpalatable to both sides. This makes it very difficult for universities to make even the softest approaches to the political other.

As far back as 2004, right-wing politicians derided the 'reality-based community' for its insistence on professional and scientific expertise in

policymaking. Widely attributed to Karl Rove, the idea is that 'when [powerful governments] act, we create our own reality', whereas experts simply talk about what worked in the past.[26]

This critique is not confined to the right. Maurice Glasman, who founded Blue Labour, recently coined the now-popular term 'the lanyard classes' to describe what he sees as a rules-obsessed professional cadre hindering Britain's success.[27] University advocates often conform to these descriptions and, to an extent, both are fair. Universities do major on facts and reality, because these are our stock in trade. As evidence-led, research-oriented institutions, we promote rules, process and data definitions. We distrust or discount emotional arguments. But we have fallen into the trap of thinking that our idea of reality is the whole story. This places us at a disadvantage in contemporary advocacy. The current generation of politicians, faced with enormous, intractable challenges, recognise that action is more politically potent than deliberation. Politics – at least as currently played – is much more concerned with relationships, big ideas and the national interest than what worked in the settled period between the Second World War and the 2008 financial crisis.

Reform UK is only the most successful recent example of this concern. And reluctance to tolerate Reform UK further reduces the likelihood that academics or institutions will engage constructively with the party's agenda – indeed, they may be tempted, as the Green surge continues, to align with Green positions on climate, foreign policy or economic reform in open opposition to Reform. Whether or not they gain power, Reform UK are making the political weather on many important issues. This will be a major weakness for the sector in the run-up to the next general election, and the one after that too. If they do gain power, whether in their own right or in coalition, we will see a two-stage process at work.

Bold interventions in higher education are a typical first move for incoming governments with a strong electoral mandate. And the new government may well get its way if it provides a major financial incentive. The Blair Government landed its ambitious 50 per cent participation target. The Scottish National Party abolished fees for Scottish-domiciled undergraduates. The Coalition Government tripled tuition fees in England. But when money is not involved,

universities assert their autonomy to frustrate government objectives. This goes down badly, especially when it looks like resistance to popular will, inefficiency or grandstanding. In recent years, UK universities have stonewalled numerous government initiatives, or at best, failed in their enthusiasm and made negligible progress. Recent examples include the so-called Augar Review and the antisemitism drive (both under the Conservatives), and the LLE and the *Post-16 Education and Skills* white paper (Labour). These reports and policies often enjoy considerable cross-party sympathy.

Foot-dragging will provoke any strong government to action. In such a government's first term, universities might get away with asserting their independence to frustrate the objective. A second-term government, older and wilier, takes the gloves off. This second stage has a particular flavour with populist governments, as we see overseas. Higher education has become a defining battleground for right and leftwing governments, particularly populists such as in Hungary and the USA. Symbolic battles are fought in the first term and are often lost by the government, perhaps by design. In the second term, the government returns to finish the job, exerting colossal pressure on institutional autonomy, academic freedom and research funding.

If we engage with Westminster as if nothing has changed or that business-as-usual will prevail, the sector will miss the wider signals that a new settlement is overdue and that a significant reset is coming. The UK higher education sector therefore needs to engage ahead of time. It should not simply brace for whatever comes next but seize the initiative while it still can. That means articulating clearly what 'good' looks like, making a positive and constructive pitch for change and proactively shaping the future rather than waiting for change to be imposed.

As polarisation takes hold of UK politics, universities must bring people from all walks of life into regular contact with university life. There are several well-tested ways in which universities are building everyday contact with the public. These include bringing people onto university campuses, taking knowledge out into the community (through mobile seminars and events) and embedding academics in everyday life, such as through short placements in local councils, NHS services or cultural organisations. All these civic activities

are commonplace across the sector, yet universities are still not achieving sufficient cut-through with the wider population.

This is all the more remarkable given that around half of all young people now progress to higher education, meaning few other sectors enjoys such sustained exposure to the general public. If these young people and their families are not convinced with the sector's offer, then it is doubtful whether well-intentioned calls for universities 'to do more to welcome people onto campus and to make their activity more visible' would materially improve the situation.[28] You can bring the horse to water, but that does not mean it will drink. Unless universities find new ways to make their value visible, relatable and relevant, deep public recognition of their benefits will continue to lag behind the scale of their reach.

What is more, engagement is not a one-way street. Connecting with the public also means exposing staff and students to ideas and attitudes they may find uncomfortable. This does not mean universities should capitulate to them, but they should not equally dismiss them out of hand either. Defensiveness is unappealing, while responsiveness earns trust. Universities should therefore show they can listen enough to popular instincts and translate them into evidence-based proposals for broader benefit.

Universities should also show that they can manage themselves in the wider public interest. Issues of governance – such as fairness, transparency, executive pay and the student voice – are not just internal matters to institutions. They send a strong signal about the sector to its stakeholders. There is rising criticism that university boards are out-of-touch or 'in the pocket' of the executive.[29] This is why there are regular calls for democratic election to trustee bodies. If university board meetings took place in public, it would be less easy to attack vice-chancellor pay in the press, for example.

The University of Dundee case in Scotland has already shown how management and governance failings can invite political control of institutions. Yet, without a renewal of the sector's legitimacy anytime soon, any future financial settlement of this kind will be sure to come with strings – and those strings may be quite short.

4. Legitimacy – in three dimensions

Legitimacy is not a single attribute. It has three aspects: **instrumental, relational** and **moral**.[30] These different dimensions influence universities in the following ways:

Instrumental: doing the job well

Instrumental legitimacy is basic effectiveness. In the private sector, it is about doing the job in hand. Commercial companies are judged to be effective based on demand and return-on-investment metrics.

Public universities cannot copy this approach, because they are 'at the crossroads between the public and private spheres … [where] significantly more interest groups have a stake than in traditional corporate contexts.'[31] Instead, instrumental legitimacy rests on the quality of teaching and learning. Institutions must be able to explain what students are expected to learn, why that learning matters individually and to the nation and how standards are protected. Otherwise, wider claims of impact on innovation or economic growth will not be given a hearing.

There are four other good arguments for the instrumental legitimacy of higher education. These benefits will be familiar to most readers, as they are already well explored by the sector. Even so, they could be prioritised better. In descending order of impact, higher education provides:

i. **Intellectual property:** Universities manage important knowledge in various fields and industries. They do this through research and teaching in areas ranging from Creative disciplines and Languages through to Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Epidemiology.

ii. **Open innovation:** Universities partner with government, industry and civil society. Examples include forging close relationships in local 'knowledge clusters', science parks and innovation districts.

iii. **Employability:** Universities are often the final stage in preparing people for the workforce and a key source of continuing professional development and reskilling.

iv. **Economic contribution:** Universities support economic growth in their local towns, cities and regions. They are also important civic players in industrial powerhouses such as the Oxford-Cambridge Arc.[32]

We are all in favour of economic arguments, even if they come last in this list. Economics is a vital foundation for restoring universities' legitimacy. However, it is a cheap trick if every advocacy argument is brought back to money. The sector has done so because, until recently, effectiveness and economic efficiency mattered most in public policy – often known as neoliberalism.

In his manifesto for *Transforming University Education*, Paul Ashwin agrees that 'economic justifications have overly dominated public discussions of the purpose of higher education.'[33] He calls for a return to the concept of universities as stewards of powerful bodies of knowledge. One way of doing this would be to focus more on the national benefits of this knowledge. Professor Sir Anthony Finkelstein, President of City St George's, notes that universities often have global and civic strategies but generally no national strategy. He thinks universities should work harder to make the case for their legitimacy at the national level. They should show, for example, they are effective 'for developing and maintaining sovereign capabilities and know-how.'[34]

Relational: acting for society

Sovereign capabilities take us beyond the instrumental dimension into the relational. The requirement to act in the interests of society is vital. This is especially true in a populist era, which emphasises national pride and cultural contribution over narrow efficiency.

The relational dimension of legitimacy is fundamentally an appeal to common sense and common values. People trust a university when they have a strong sense that its core work benefits others, not just itself. Relational legitimacy helps people believe a university is doing the right thing for society, even if they cannot quite put their finger on why that is. It is not only about being fair or respectful, or about the direct beneficiaries of teaching and research. It is about a consensus that universities' teaching and research are helping the public at large.

Most people's main experience of a university is a student experience, either directly or through a family member. Relational legitimacy depends on what happens to the student, starting with teaching. In this sense, curriculum design is a public act. It shapes how knowledge moves beyond the university and how graduates understand their role in society. The other vital factor is whether students feel respected and supported. Societal trust is built or lost on how universities respond to personal crisis, mental health, safeguarding, accommodation problems and financial hardship. The Westminster Hall debate in January 2026 on universities possibly having a statutory duty of care to students is above all a relational matter.[35]

Word of mouth, parental confidence and local reputation are often formed less by policy statements than by how institutions behave when difficulties arise.

If courses connect clearly to social and economic life, trust is strengthened. This can include placements within degree programmes, projects set by public or community partners and collaboration with employers in designing parts of the curriculum. When teaching shows clear links to real problems and real skills, the university's value becomes easier to see.

Universities already have strong tools at their disposal for this. They have deep knowledge, skilled people and prominent positions in society. They can show their relational power in the following ways:

❱ **Public scholarship**: Taking part in national conversations about social, cultural and economic issues and sharing evidence that helps people understand the world.

❱ **Pluralistic platforms**: Providing safe spaces where different views can be heard and discussed openly, without forcing everyone to agree.

❱ **Managing intellectual bias**: Ensuring research remains balanced and rigorous by recognising, addressing and reducing biases in methods, assumptions and evidence.

❱ **Cultural stewardship**: Linking research and teaching to real life and the big issues facing the nation, reinforcing universities as guardians of knowledge and creativity.

- » **Narrative leadership**: In an oversimplified world, telling compelling stories about how lives are changed, discoveries made and communities strengthened.

- » **Global prestige as a national asset**: Using the university's reputation to bring talent, ideas and investment into the country, and showing that these benefits are really shared.

Trust grows when universities do their main work in ways that make a positive difference to people's lives. But it goes nowhere if they try to be something they are not.

In recent years, universities have regularly worried that the public trust them less. Mostly, they try to fix this with instrumental arguments about value. When that does not work, the usual next step is drawing on social initiatives. There are frequent calls for universities to become 'social activists and social entrepreneurs, constantly focused on public impact.'[36] The social purpose agenda is the best-known example of this. It invites universities to become a first-rate political force, 'taking positions on the social and political issues of the day.'[37] Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) projects cover similar ground.

While these activities show that a university cares about wider society, this only shines through if there is a real connection with its core activities. At some universities, social entrepreneurship is indeed part of the core job. At most universities, this is not the centre of their mission, and it never will be. The message becomes that the university must do extra things to be valued and so these attempts seem vulnerable. First, they sit outside core academic business, so most universities will get rid of them under financial pressure, damaging trust in the process. Secondly, they are usually designed to oppose right-wing thinking and therefore will be only cyclically popular with the party in power. If, as we said in the introduction, Reform UK continue to make the weather, then social initiatives tempt a storm to break out.

Moral: playing by, and shaping, the rules

Moral legitimacy is about obeying the rules, and if possible, also making them. At its best, politics is a form of knowledge exchange and an innovation process

of ideas, values and priorities expressed through rhetoric, regulation and law. Universities should be good at this process, in much the same way that business interests shape national understanding, and they can achieve moral legitimacy in several ways. Methods include:

❱ **Co-created benchmarks**: Actively developing sector-led standards for quality, trust and public value, rather than accepting imposed metrics.

❱ **Democratic leadership norms**: Exploring models that restore confidence in institutional leadership. For example, balancing managerial control with academic input. Or embedding diverse stakeholder voices – students, staff, civic partners, industry – into decision-making processes.

❱ **Signals of fairness**: When facing controversial issues, not just treating them as a crisis to be weathered. And understanding what signals they send about the sector's commitments to wider society.

❱ **Collaboration at scale**: Aligning mission groups and representative bodies around shared accountability frameworks, reducing fragmentation and vulnerability to political narratives.

Universities show they play by the rules when their decision-making processes are transparent. And when they engage proactively with public expectations. Mature management of regulation is another crucial aspect of accountability.

Universities often have high control over their own areas of expertise (such as peer review and academic freedom), yet low control when it comes to funding relationships (such as political funding priorities for public research and industry partnerships). However, the balance is now tipped towards low autonomy on the areas they are most expert at. As Paul Ashwin points out, in England, 'higher education needs to challenge the way in which the OfS has framed "the student interest"'. He thinks institutions have allowed this to be presented in ways that suit 'the narrow ideological stance' of government or 'the selfish interests' of particular sector groups.[38]

Better sectoral coordination is the obvious answer to regaining more control over strategy, coordination and narrative. In our sector advocacy and public affairs work, we are very familiar with the lack of synchronisation across

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sector groupings. In an ideal world, the national representative body – Universities UK – would lead the sector chorus, with each group adding their unique flourishes. If every group sticks to the same hymn sheet, the sector would be so much stronger. In other words, if UUK took on a stronger sector coordination role, there would be fewer opportunities for confusion and – at worst – contradiction.

Alongside this, there is a need for regulatory and funding bodies to demonstrate that they are attentive to concerns arising across the whole political spectrum, rather than appearing to be hand-in-glove with whichever government happens to be in office. This was a criticism publicly levelled by the House of Lords to England's regulator, the OfS, when it concluded it lacked independence from the UK government in 2024.[39] It is also a concern that is growing as UK Research and Development funds are increasingly targeted towards activities that can be proven to align with the current Government's priorities, including economic growth and security and defence.[40] In a period of increasing political volatility, regulators and funders that are seen as aligned too closely with one political side risk losing legitimacy with the others – and this, in turn, threatens the stability and credibility of the entire regulatory settlement.

One practical solution would be the establishment of a political advisory panel for the OfS and similar bodies in the devolved administrations, such as Medr in Wales, drawing together trusted policy professionals who can take a 'big picture' view of political developments in their respective jurisdictions. This would offer regulators and funders a structured way to understand shifting political expectations, anticipate future pressures and maintain strategic neutrality. By embedding political pluralism at the heart of regulation in this way, the sector would be better protected from policy whiplash and better positioned to speak with authority, consistency and confidence regardless of who forms the next government.

5. From compliance to legitimate leadership

In sum, the challenge that lies ahead is not just to defend the sector's autonomy but to earn it – through confidence, collaboration and clarity. Universities must therefore broaden and simplify the legitimacy of knowledge.

The institutions best equipped for the next decade and its political strategies will combine powerful knowledge with boldness and pragmatism. They will respond to the national interest, and be confident in shaping the norms, rules and measures by which they are judged. They will not just defend their autonomy; they will earn it from their political masters, irrespective of where they stand on the political spectrum.

This section sets out practical ways in which UK universities can move from compliance to leadership across all three dimensions of legitimacy through a shared sense of direction. What follows is an invitation to reimagine the sector's posture, politics and purpose. Our proposals are designed to help universities reclaim their role as public institutions, not private interests, as ideas-makers and rule-makers and as national leaders, not bystanders.

Reframe the sector's core offer

Many sector leaders recognise the need for a different way to talk about the sector. They include Education Secretary Bridget Phillipson, who – while she was still the Shadow Secretary of State – explained her idea of education was based on 'a broader vision of the society we should build.'[41] In a HEPI blog in the wake of the new Labour Government, Professor Sir Chris Husbands advised institutions to have 'a clearly articulated value proposition, communicated strongly and effectively and capable of driving the operating model.'[42]

Professor Shitij Kapur, President of King's College London, points out that, as university education becomes universal, it can no longer promise social mobility. Quoting Martin Trow, he predicts three things. Two make gloomy reading because they are true: 'Social regard for the exceptionalism of

university graduates will go down … [and] the graduate premium will go down, because a degree will become something that's not scarce at all.' Kapur's third prediction, however, would provide the kernel of a bold new core offer: 'from being a privilege, it [a university education] will start becoming a necessity' for participating in advanced society.[43]

The sector's core offer begins with teaching. Universities do not simply represent knowledge. They organise it into programmes that develop practical and cognitive capabilities, judgement, understanding and skills. Reframing the core offer therefore requires visible attention to curriculum renewal.

The sector's core offer should resonate with everyday concerns: national pride, resilience, opportunity, fairness and belonging. This means:

❱ **developing shared narratives** that link higher education to national renewal, not teaching quality, individual wealth creation or economic growth;

❱ **embedding civic contributions** into institutional strategies and performance measures, not just reliance on the goodwill and engagement of individuals; and

❱ **engaging with national and regional priorities**, showing how universities contribute sovereign capabilities to the nation, anchor communities and catalyse change.

This is not about abandoning economic arguments. It is about contextualising them within a broader social contract that will seem familiar, credible and interesting to a wide range of different stakeholder groups.

Behave differently

With a new core offer, the sector must start being constructive and act collectively. After all, legitimacy is a collective-level phenomenon.[44] This means:

❱ **rebalancing engagement with local representatives** (councillors and MPs) from all political parties to reduce the effects of cultural mismatch;

- **pooling resources** for shared advocacy and public engagement campaigns;

- **coordinating responses** to political challenges, particularly among representative bodies and mission groups, to avoid fragmented narratives; and

- **adopting efficiency and collaboration models**, such as those proposed by Sir Nigel Carrington's UUK Taskforce Group, to demonstrate responsiveness and value.

Tone has a vital part to play in this change. During a closed session, it may be tempting to disparage a person or party, such as Nigel Farage or Reform UK, but this is not the same as attacking their policy position. It is a tribal signal. It reinforces the perception that universities are hostile to certain parts of the electorate and to politicians in general. It also risks alienating future political masters. The sector must model respect for political diversity if it expects to earn it in return.

Adopting initiatives like these would signal a change in tone and behaviour in ways which government and stakeholders value. This opens the door to wider forms of value, such as institutional character, societal contribution and the ability to support local resilience. The most successful institutions will apply a confident and ideologically-agile agenda to shape the norms, rules and measures by which they are judged.

Build a coalition for legitimacy

The collective approach is not just a matter for individual institutions. We need sector bodies to work together to manage all dimensions of legitimacy at the macro level. This means:

- **creating a cross-sector legitimacy compact** that aligns institutions, mission groups and representative bodies around shared principles and priorities;

- **amplifying diverse voices**, including students, civic partners and regional stakeholders, to counter perceptions of elitism and insularity; and

- **establishing political advisory panels** within the structure of regulators, such as the OfS and Medr, to provide ongoing insight into political attitudes

across the full spectrum of parties and public viewpoints, and strengthen the credibility and neutrality of regulatory decisions.

These coalitions created by the sector must be agile, inclusive and politically literate. This is a major change from the sector's current strategy. They will also need to be led by vice-chancellors. At present, sector bodies, mission groups and regulators do exactly what you would expect them to do in a competitive environment. They compete for influence, present divergent narratives and have differing priorities.[45] This makes the sector more vulnerable to political attacks. For example, the recent international student levy is broadly accepted by large high-tariff universities yet incredibly painful to smaller providers and those without the benefit of price elasticity to cover the costs.

Establish a legitimacy observatory

A core task is to monitor and understand the misalignment between universities and national attitudes. Three annual measures would help the sector correct for its most important blind spots:

❱ **tracking public trust in universities** on an annual basis to measure the sector's perceived competence and ethics and identify the social, economic and political factors behind those perceptions;

❱ **measuring British attitudes** and tracking the difference between median British attitudes and those held by university staff and students, including outsourced staff; and

❱ **undertaking a perceptions audit** to establish a baseline of external misunderstanding of the sector, modelled on the King's / HEPI audit of perceptions.

Together, these measures could become a valuable way of gauging public interest in the sector and monitoring political signals and sector performance on an annual basis. They could also become a tool for advocacy, providing an annual opportunity to remind the public of the extent of the sector's contributions to society. The public trust survey might be modelled, for example, on the Edelman Trust Barometer, which is the global survey of public trust in government, business, NGOs and the media.[46]

Reclaim the intellectual project

The sector must show itself capable of providing the knowledge and capabilities the UK needs to be independent and strong. Universities must re-enter the national conversation – not as commentators, but as active contributors. This means:

❱ **investing in public scholarship**, media engagement and policy translation;

❱ **creating platforms for political pluralism**, where conservative, progressive and populist ideas can be debated with rigour and respect; and

❱ **rebuilding trust with decision-makers**, not through lobbying for their own interests alone but through genuine partnerships aimed at achieving public policy priorities.

As national assets, universities have a responsibility to engage across the political spectrum – not just with liberal causes, but with conservative instincts and populist concerns. Setting aside matters of conscience, that means working with rather than resisting the political direction of travel. It means demonstrating responsiveness, efficiency and relevance through measurable contributions to national resilience, cultural life and public services.

Lead regulatory reform from within

Moral legitimacy is won through strategic engagement with the political and public terrain as it actually exists.

The sector must develop a shared playbook, bolder concepts and co-ordinating architecture. And it must show that it holds itself accountable. Only in this way will it be able to define the public value of universities on its own terms.

Rather than waiting for external intervention, universities must pre-empt them with genuine public engagement. The pivot from compliance to leadership might mean:

❱ **designing sector-led frameworks** for accountability, transparency and student interest that reflect genuine public engagement;

❱ **reforming governance structures** to balance managerial efficiency with transparency and accountability; and

❱ **co-creating new metrics of success**, beyond graduate earnings and Research Excellence Framework (REF) scores, that reflect the sector's national, civic, cultural and intellectual contributions.

Recovering control of sector benchmarks should not mean disengaging from them but reshaping them through constructive partnership. The sector needs to acknowledge where its own approach to quality and transparency has fallen short, and use that as the basis for a positive and forward-looking reset. Working collaboratively, universities could propose a refreshed framework for evidencing teaching quality, for example – one that is simpler, more meaningful to students, more trusted by employers and more workable for institutions and regulators alike.

Rather than stepping back, the sector should step up: articulating the standards, outcomes and public commitments that it believes define excellence, and inviting regulators to co-develop these into shared national benchmarks – ideally applicable across the whole of the UK. This would demonstrate responsibility instead of resistance, a willingness to learn from what has not worked and a determination to build something better in partnership. It would also signal that universities intend to take public legitimacy seriously by co-creating measures that reflect both educational excellence and wider public value.

A similar recalibration is needed in relation to England's Longitudinal Education Outcomes (LEO) data. Instead of treating LEO as an external imposition or a flawed metric to be resisted, the sector should acknowledge where it has failed to offer clearer and contextualised evidence about graduate outcomes. A more constructive stance would involve working with government and regulators to reshape LEO into a richer and more proportionate tool. This would recognise regional labour markets, public-service careers, creative and cultural pathways, self-employment and the complex mix of social value and economic value that universities generate. By presenting a positive proposal for how LEO could evolve into a balanced outcomes framework, the sector would show that it is not rejecting accountability altogether but is helping

to improve it. This kind of sector-led redesign – anchored in transparency, fairness and a fair representation of long-term graduate trajectories – would demonstrate maturity, rebuild trust and reinforce the message that universities want to get this right for students, taxpayers and society alike.

In addition, universities should work together, not separately, to explain their contribution to civic and societal work. This should be coordinated across the full spectrum of sector bodies and their allies. For example, UUK ran the very good *Made At Uni* campaign in 2018.[47] It would have cut through much more, however, if backed by the full might of each mission group's advocacy tools and unique audiences. Future sector campaigns need to convey measurable benefits, be visible, be tied to ideas that resonate with people's everyday concerns and, above all, be amplified through strategic coordination across sector bodies – not just relying on goodwill or post-publication requests for promotion.

6. Conclusion and recommendations

The legitimacy gap in higher education is not a passing storm. It is a structural reckoning. It is also an opportunity. Whatever its merits, marketisation has forced the public out of passive acceptance into active evaluation of universities. Universities have been slow to catch on, facing a broad-based question with a narrow answer. Yet if universities now reframe their offer, they can emerge stronger, more trusted and more central to national life.

Based on social science concepts, this paper has argued that legitimacy must be rebuilt across three dimensions: instrumental, moral and relational. It has shown that the sector cannot be justified by economics alone. It suggests that the sector must engage with the full spectrum of political and public sentiment, lest its value be diminished in the future.

To regain trust, universities must be seen as effective, interesting and ethical. They should also shift towards common sense arguments and intuition. This is hard, but it is possible and necessary. As they start to regain the legitimacy of the sector, institutions could agree to one or more of the following five proposals as a matter of urgency, based on collaboration:

❭ **Co-created benchmarks:** Actively developing sector-led standards for quality, trust and public value, rather than passively accepting imposed metrics.

❭ **Accountable leadership norms:** Exploring models that restore confidence in institutional leadership, from properly recruited trustees to outside observers on key governance committees.

❭ **Signals of fairness:** Addressing flashpoints such as vice-chancellor pay by ensuring governance reflects the sector's commitment to equity and social mobility.

❭ **Co-operation at scale:** Aligning institutions, mission groups and representative bodies around shared accountability frameworks, lest divided we fall.

❱ **Balanced political stewardship:** Enhancing the sector's credibility by encouraging regulators and funding bodies to establish politically plural advisory panels – drawing on balanced insight from across the political spectrum – to strengthen the robustness and public legitimacy of regulatory and funding decisions.

In conclusion, the sector must work together across its various divides. It must become more comfortable with what populism tells us without needing to reconcile itself with populism's easy answers. It must tell the story of its core contribution to national life in three parts: instrumental, moral and relational. In this way, universities will speak to the values and aspirations of today's society. This will turn a moment of peril into a platform for renewal. The time to act is now – with confidence, courage and co-operation.

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Debate

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It is a decade since the Brexit referendum – yet what have UK universities learned? As Reform UK and other insurgent parties grow, the sector hesitates to engage with the full range of democratic opinion. In a landscape reshaped by public discontent, universities risk being left behind.

This paper argues higher education's biggest challenge is no longer funding but legitimacy. Patience is wearing thin and technocratic messages about economic impact are falling flat. When people call for national renewal, universities can appear defensive and out of touch.

This timely report urges a new posture – one that rebuilds trust across parties and reconnects with public sentiment. Setting out a practical framework for renewing legitimacy, the authors show how universities can regain autonomy and public confidence through conduct and relationships that command respect. Universities can help restore trust in public institutions but, if they fail to do so, the next decade could be tougher than the last one.