Higher Education Policy Institute

Annual Review

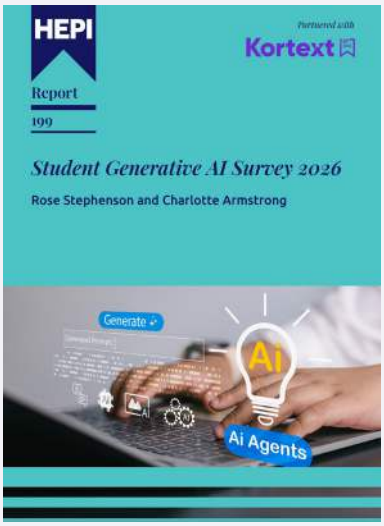
2025/26



HEPI Annual Review

2025/26

The Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) was first established in late 2002, so will soon be approaching its 25th birthday. During 2025/26, it had perhaps its most successful ever year, beginning in autumn 2025 with the adoption of HEPI's first new visual identity since its foundation and a new website. By the end of the year, the organisation had produced a near-record number of publications, delivered unprecedented impact through its events and other activities and hosted around a million website visits.



This was only possible thanks to the support of a record number of corporate Partners (22) and the continued support of most UK universities (132). The enormous challenges that continue to mount up and which daily confront the higher education sector are a reminder of the importance of HEPI's policy-focused work.

HEPI's work in 2025/26 was delivered by a team of two full-time and four part-time members of staff – five full-time equivalent members of staff in total. HEPI is neither the best resourced nor the biggest institution in either think-tank land or UK higher education, but it is among the most agile. While HEPI remains proudly non-partisan, quality is maintained via a rigorous peer-review process to which all full-length reports are subject and which is overseen by the organisation's Trustees, chaired by Professor Dame Sally Mapstone, as well as an Advisory Board, who all support the organisation's work on a voluntary basis.

While it remains harder to assess the impact of a non-partisan charity like HEPI than of organisations that exist to lobby for specific changes, HEPI's impact was nonetheless clear in 2025/26. For example, HEPI's work directly influenced England's *Post-16 Education and Skills* white paper (October 2025), the UK Government's updated *International Education Strategy* (January 2026), the Office for Students' *Strategy* (November 2025) and the Welsh Government's consultation on *The future of tertiary education in Wales* (January 2026). During the year, a HEPI report originally published in July 2025, *The hidden impact of menstruation in higher education* by Rose Stephenson, won an award at the Smart Thinking 2025 Think Tank Awards. The piece of work with the broadest reach, the HEPI / Kortext *Student Generative AI Survey*, is known to have impacted policy debates around the world, including in Egypt, France, Germany, Ireland and Japan as well as in North America.

> ***'I rely on HEPI Publications in order to ensure lived experience and legitimate research regarding Higher Education is embedded into my Parliamentary work.'***
>
> Alex Sobel MP, the Co-Chair of the Students All-Party Parliamentary Group on Students

Publications

In 2025/26, HEPI produced new projects: **38**

12
HEPI 'blue book' Reports

8
HEPI Policy Notes

7
HEPI Debate Papers

7
joint reports with other organisations

4
news releases that included original data

The number of new HEPI publications was the second highest ever in 2025/26 and the highest for a year without a general election in it. The output ranged widely over different topics, but there was a particular focus on international students, student finance and artificial intelligence. Other topics covered in depth included governance, free speech, regulation, demand and responding to populism. In addition, there were a number of new reports on specific topics that have not always had the focus they deserve, such as universities in war, careers support for PhD students and placements for medical students.

In addition to the HEPI Reports, Debate Papers and Policy Notes, we also produced data showing the different characteristics of educational institutions, including the *Social Mobility Index* (with LSBU), the *Soft-Power Index* (with Kaplan) and a ranking of secondary schools according to their provision of languages.

Timeline of HEPI's major pieces of written output

AUGUST

SEPTEMBER

OCTOBER

NOVEMBER

DECEMBER

JANUARY

2025

2026

8 August 2025
The true cost of the Government's proposed levy on international students
Mark Fothergill and Nick Hillman

12 August 2025
A Minimum Income Standard for Students
Katherine Hill, Matt Padley and Josh Freeman

20 August 2025
UK higher education: Public perceptions vs reality
King's College Policy Institute / HEPI

18 September 2025
The Wartime University: The role of higher education in civil readiness
Dr Gary F Fisher

16 October 2025
AI and the Future of Universities
Dr Giles Carden and Josh Freeman (eds)

23 October 2025
HEPI / Kaplan 2025 Soft-Power Index
Nick Hillman OBE

30 October 2025
A Call for Radical Reform: Higher Education for a Sustainable Economy
Professor Tim Blackman

13 November 2025
Rethinking Placement: Increasing Clinical Placement Efficacy for a Sustainable NHS Future
Professor Amanda Broderick and Robert Waterson

20 November 2025
Student Working Lives
Professor Adrian Wright, Dr Mark Wilding, Mary Lawler and Martin Lowe

4 December 2025
Views on university governance
Professor Steven Jones

11 December 2025
Rethinking student voice: how can higher education design effective student governance?
Darcie Jones

18 December 2025
A Baker's Dozen: Thirteen years of book reviews on higher education, 2013 to 2025
Nick Hillman OBE

8 January 2026
Using Artificial Intelligence (AI) to Advance Translational Research
Rose Stephenson and Lan Murdock

15 January 2026
Are students still 'woke'?
Nick Hillman OBE

2026

FEBRUARY

MARCH

APRIL

MAY

JUNE

JULY

5 February 2026
Making Metrics Matter: A more ambitious approach to tackling racial inequity in higher education
Dr Katharine Hubbard

12 February 2026
'We believe this is the way to do it': Exploring the City St George's merger
Simon Watts and Amy Ripley

19 February 2026
From investment to outcomes: Capabilities to deliver purposeful public investment in research
Sarah Chaytor and Grace Gottlieb

26 February 2026
Assessing potential manifesto commitments on higher education funding in Wales
Dr Gavan Conlon, Maike Halterbeck and Jack Booth

5 March 2026
Being indispensable: Capabilities for a human-AI world, the 'FUTURES' framework
Dr Doug Specht and Professor Gunter Saunders

12 March 2026
Student Generative AI Survey 2026
Rose Stephenson and Charlotte Armstrong

19 March 2026
Preparing for populism
Edward Venning and Diana Beech

24 March 2026
HEPI / LSBU Social Mobility Index 2026

26 March 2026
Scaling Opportunities
Charlotte Gleed and Charlotte Armstrong

9 April 2026
A degree of regulation: Building a more financially sustainable and resilient higher education sector
Tom Richmond

13 April 2026
Understanding Plan 2 student loan repayment terms
London Economics

23 April 2026
A clear and present danger: Investing in collaborative platforms to accelerate the transition to a green economy
Professor Katy Mason

30 April 2026
Fairer for All: Towards a centralised model of admissions and access at Oxford and Cambridge
Charlotte Armstrong

14 May 2026
What Matters Most? 20 years of the student experience
Dr Gosia Turner and Rose Stephenson

21 May 2026
What UK university AI policies actually do: A study of 96 institutions
Sam Illingworth

28 May 2026
Demographic decline and predatory recruitment: The twin threats to English higher education into the 2040s
Bahram Bekhradnia

4 June 2026
A breed apart? What do young undergraduates think of controversial and divisive issues?
Nick Hillman OBE

11 June 2026
HEPI / Advance HE Student Academic Experience Survey 2026
Jonathan Neves, Rose Stephenson and Charlotte Armstrong

18 June 2026
Interconnected Innovation: Physical connectivity as the missing ingredient in UK research and innovation policy
Sarah Chaytor and Professor Geraint Rees

22 June 2026
Unite Students / HEPI Applicant Index

1 July 2026
A new league table celebrates schools with the most extensive language provision
Nick Hillman OBE

6 July 2026
Moving Away? The past and future of student accommodation
The Revd Canon Professor William Whyte

9 July 2026
The benefits and costs of international higher education students to the UK economy
James Cannings, Sam Hartshorn, Maike Halterbeck, Marina Symington and Dr Gavan Conlon

16 July 2026
More than academia: Expanding career support for doctoral researchers
Dr Charlotte Fawcett

23 July 2026
New choices: Revisiting futures for higher education in England
Professor Sir Chris Husbands

Events

In 2025/26, HEPI hosted **29** events: **18** in-person and **11** online and they attracted around **6,000** registrations.

The in-person events included HEPI's flagship Annual Conference, sponsored by Kortext and TechnologyOne, seven roundtable dinners, four events at the Labour and Conservative Party Conferences in conjunction with HEPI Partners, the annual series of parliamentary seminars with Advance HE and the UK launch of the OECD's flagship *Education at a Glance*.

The webinars – all of which were free to attend, open to all and with time for audience participation – covered issues including students in paid employment, institutional mergers, student governors, lessons for leadership from other sectors, AI, the cost-of-living for students, the previous 20 years of the student experience, the economic benefits of international students and the views of applicants looking ahead to their higher education.



Alex Proudfoot (CEO, Independent Higher Education), Alistair Jarvis CBE (CEO, Advance HE), Professor David Sweeney CBE (Deputy Chair, Medr) and Professor Deborah Prentice (Vice Chancellor, University of Cambridge), speaking at a HEPI / Advance HE breakfast seminar in Parliament



Networking over coffee at the HEPI Annual Conference, June 2026



Nick Hillman OBE (CEO, HEPI), Professor Bobby Duffy (Director, The Policy Institute at King's College London), Sophie Stowers (Research Manager, More in Common UK) and Vivienne Stern MBE (CEO, Universities UK) at the HEPI Annual Conference

HEPI webinar topics

2025/26

12 August 2025
In Conversation with Dr Jo Saxton CBE, CEO at UCAS

10 September 2025
The cost-of-living for students and maintenance support levels

11 December 2025
How can student governors have maximum impact?

10 November 2025
AI and the future of universities

11 November 2025:
Broke and broken? What TRAC data tells us about higher education finances

10 February 2026
Collaborative mergers and acquisitions in higher education

13 January 2026
HEPI / Advance HE: What can higher education leadership learn from other sectors?

29 January 2026
Student Working Lives

14 May 2026
HEPI / TechnologyOne: 20 years of the student experience

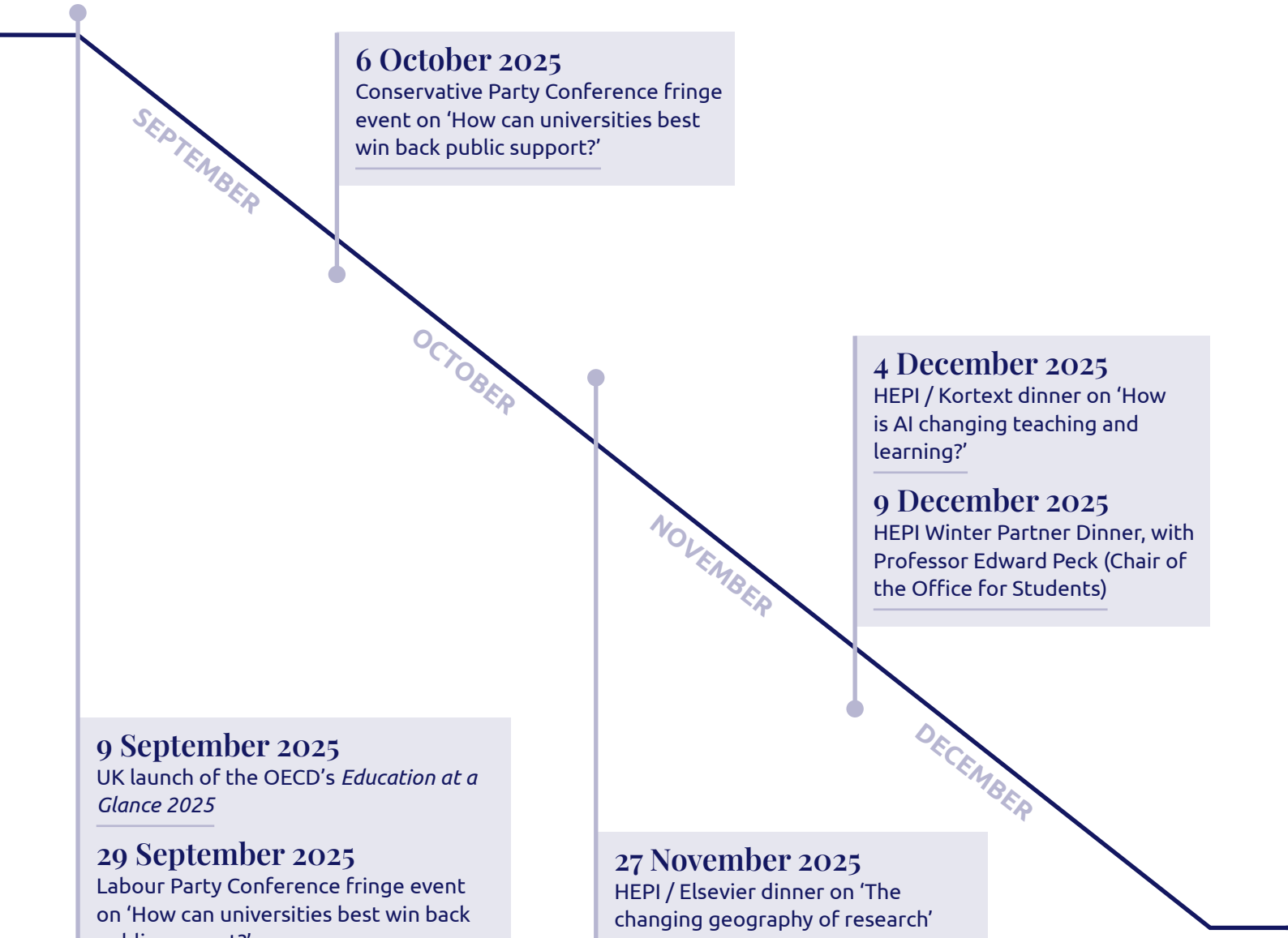
9 July 2026
HEPI / Kaplan / London Economics: The economic costs and benefits of international students

24 June 2026
Launch of the Unite Students / HEPI 2026 Applicant Index

All these webinars remain available to watch on HEPI's YouTube channel.

In-person HEPI events

2025



9 September 2025
UK launch of the OECD's *Education at a Glance 2025*

29 September 2025
Labour Party Conference fringe event on 'How can universities best win back public support?'

29 September 2025
Labour Party Conference fringe event on 'Defending and enhancing the UK's global reputation and excellence in education'

29 September 2025
Labour Party Conference fringe event on 'What will the future of higher education funding mean for students?'

6 October 2025
Conservative Party Conference fringe event on 'How can universities best win back public support?'

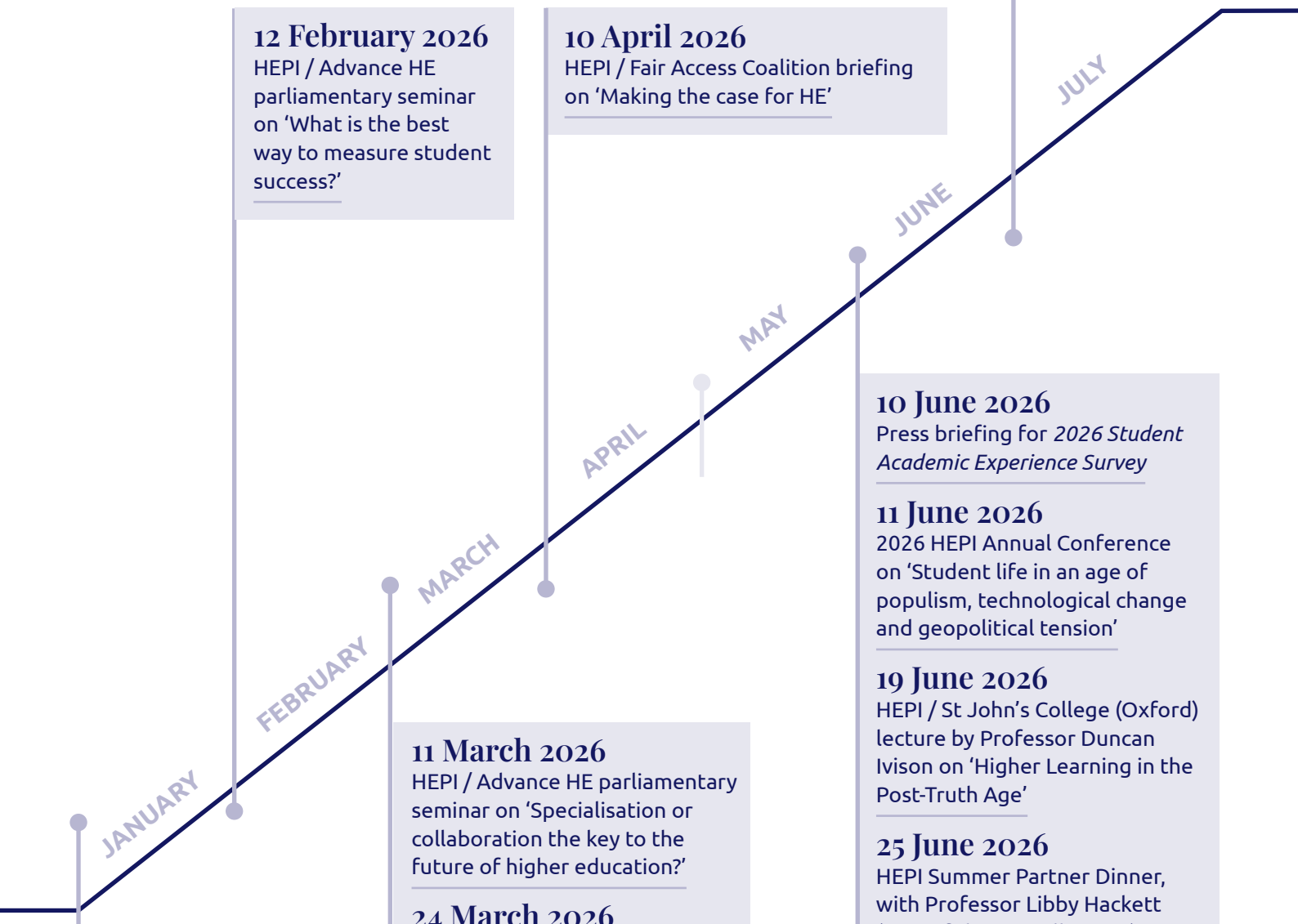
27 November 2025
HEPI / Elsevier dinner on 'The changing geography of research'

4 December 2025
HEPI / Kortext dinner on 'How is AI changing teaching and learning?'

9 December 2025
HEPI Winter Partner Dinner, with Professor Edward Peck (Chair of the Office for Students)

In-person HEPI events

2026



28 January 2026
HEPI / Lloyds dinner on 'Universities and regional growth'

12 February 2026
HEPI / Advance HE parliamentary seminar on 'What is the best way to measure student success?'

11 March 2026
HEPI / Advance HE parliamentary seminar on 'Specialisation or collaboration the key to the future of higher education?'

24 March 2026
HEPI / Kortext dinner on 'Educating the AI Generation'

10 April 2026
HEPI / Fair Access Coalition briefing on 'Making the case for HE'

10 June 2026
Press briefing for *2026 Student Academic Experience Survey*

11 June 2026
2026 HEPI Annual Conference on 'Student life in an age of populism, technological change and geopolitical tension'

19 June 2026
HEPI / St John's College (Oxford) lecture by Professor Duncan Ivison on 'Higher Learning in the Post-Truth Age'

25 June 2026
HEPI Summer Partner Dinner, with Professor Libby Hackett (CEO of the Russell Group)

2 July 2026
HEPI / UPP Foundation dinner on 'More than just a room: Embracing the benefits of the student residential model'

Online engagement

In 2025/26, the total number of hits on HEPI's website was 936,000 (9% up on the previous year).

The three best-performing pages were all AI-related: with the top two spots taken by the 2025 and 2026 iterations of the HEPI / Kortext *Student Generative AI Survey*, which together received nearly 150,000 views, while the third was occupied by the collection of essays that HEPI produced with the University of Southampton on *AI and the Future of Universities*, edited by Dr Giles Carden and Josh Freeman.

When it comes to the daily blog, the three highest-performing new entries were on the educational backgrounds of Andy Burnham's new Cabinet, the likely cost of the incoming International Student Levy and the impact of the Renters' Rights Act.

Website hits are only a rough proxy for wider engagement. HEPI distributes printed versions of our reports to around 500 senior sector figures, and our daily blog and publications are emailed to around 16,500 subscribers.

On social media, HEPI has just under 22,000 followers on X (formerly Twitter) and over 4,000 followers on Bluesky. However, in 2025/26 HEPI shifted more of its social media presence to LinkedIn – including new 'monthly highlights' as well as 'today's takeaways' summarising each blog. Partly as a result, the number of HEPI's LinkedIn followers increased to nearly 28,000.

HEPI also regularly contributes to the national debate through engagement with specialist, local and national media and frequent attendance at others' events to talk about HEPI's work, so much of our engagement occurs via intermediaries.



Professor Dame Sally Mapstone, HEPI Chair, taking part in a panel at the HEPI Annual Conference



The Rt Hon. the Baroness Smith of Malvern, Minister for Skills, speaking at the HEPI Annual Conference

Staffing and Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI)

As normal, much of HEPI's written output included a focus on Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) issues. While discussions of EDI issues were often incorporated as part of broader commentary, some other HEPI work brought a dedicated focus to EDI topics. This included:

- a full-length HEPI Debate Paper dedicated to reforming the Teaching Excellence Framework to help address racial inequity in higher education;
- a series of blogs with The Unite Foundation on care experienced and estranged students; and
- HEPI's first deep dive into life for students living in rural areas as part of the HEPI / Advance HE *Student Academic Experience* Survey.

HEPI's events included a particular focus on the issue of term-time paid employment by less well-off students as well as a half-day workshop with the Fair Access Coalition.

Charlotte Armstrong joined HEPI in October 2025 as the new Policy Manager after Josh Freeman departed for a strategic role at the Office for Students. Her first full-length HEPI report, *Fairer for All*, considered how admissions to Oxford and Cambridge might be reformed in future.

Lucy Haire left her role as HEPI's Director of Partnerships in September 2025 to take on a role leading the UPP Foundation and was replaced by Emma Campbell in February 2026.

When fully staffed, the HEPI team was made up of four women and one man but, as three of the four female members of staff worked on a part-time basis, the female:male gender split was a little more even on a contractual-hours basis.

HEPI's paid internship programme, which exists to support people keen to work on policy, continued in 2025/26. We welcomed a PhD student from the University of Leicester, who was supported by Wellcome, to look at the provision of careers support for PhD students as well as two summer interns: an undergraduate student from India studying at UCL, to work on a project on the English-language proficiency of international students in the UK; and a postgraduate student from the University of Oxford, to look at degree-level grade inflation by subject.

In 2025/26, three women and two men served as HEPI's Trustees while HEPI's Advisory Board has been made up of three women and three men since spring 2026, when one member returned from maternity leave and another female member stood down after many years of service.

There were more male (59%) than female (41%) authors of HEPI reports, at a rate that is comparable with the previous year (60:40), while those who blogged on the HEPI website were more evenly split (52% male authors and 48% female authors). There were slightly more female than male speakers at HEPI's events in 2025/26 (52%:48%), in contrast to the previous year, which had a 60:40 split in favour of men.

Looking ahead

HEPI's on-going three-year strategy focuses, above all, on modernising internal processes and gradual expansion aimed at further raising the organisation's profile. So, having successfully adopted a new visual identity and website in early 2025/26, HEPI staff began work on preparing for the adoption of a new CRM (Customer Relationship Management) tool to go live in 2026/27. Alongside this and as the organisation looks ahead to its Silver Jubilee, HEPI aims to continue its gradual growth, with the recruitment of its first ever Communications Manager in autumn 2026.



A HEPI staff team selfie after hosting an event in Parliament: Charlotte Armstrong (Policy Manager), Carole Cox (Events and Communications Administrator), Charlotte Fawcett (PhD intern), Emma Ma (Director of Business Operations), Nick Hillman (CEO), Rose Stephenson (Director of Policy and Strategy) and Emma Campbell (Director of Partnerships)

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