

+ Securing educational excellence in higher education at a time of change

An insight report from Wonkhe for Advance HE

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Introduction

UK higher education has a deserved reputation for high quality and excellence. But increasingly it operates amid intensified political scrutiny, tighter economics, shifting student expectations, and rapid technological change. Educational excellence remains the non-negotiable route to institutional sustainability. Still, it must be re-articulated for today's realities: a more explicit purpose, a stronger community and belonging, applied and transferable learning, and confident, ethical adoption of AI.

The macro changes facing higher education institutions can appear so numerous and interact in such complex ways that mapping them to come up with a strategic cross-institutional response seems like a reach. This is, if anything, a testament to the scale and ambition of contemporary higher education.

Higher education is managing considerable immediate pressures on finances caused by rising costs and the instability of funding models. The immediate imperative to save costs and pursue income can reduce the appetite and ability of leaders and boards to look beyond these short term pressures and attempt to forecast the impact of the much more nebulous and less knowable longer term shifts.

Yet managing the current situation and looking to the future go hand in hand. Higher education may face challenging times, but there is no viable path through the current circumstances that does not include sustaining excellence in education provision. Having a clear institutional grip of the nature and possible scale of those changes, and how they may shape future attitudes to and expectations of higher education among students, employers, the public and policymakers, is a foundational necessity for developing ambitious but realistic plans for future sustainability.

Institutional survival means nothing without educational excellence. The nature of excellence will vary by mission group, but at its core is the consistent delivery of inclusive high-quality learning that enables students to achieve valued outcomes, experience belong and contribute to society.

We all benefit when higher education institutions – and in particular, the people, students and staff who constitute that institution – can look confidently toward the future, prepared to thrive. There is no getting around the fact that for some – even many – the pursuit of that state will mean difficult choices and trade-offs in the present. So there is a clear and immediate priority for institutions to bolster their own change capability, both in terms of strategy and financing, and in terms of the ability to convene and engage with the voices of staff and students and generate the will and the commitment required to see change through.

This report results from three online round tables held in March 2025 with 11 senior leaders in learning and teaching, 15 principal fellows of Advance HE, and three student representatives, co-hosted by Advance HE and Wonkhe. In different ways all three have a leadership and facilitation role in interpreting signals from the external landscape and their

likely impact on higher education, and articulating an education change and enhancement agenda that brings together institutional strategic development plans, educational and pedagogic values and ethos, and students' experiences and potential to succeed.

Ahead of the round tables Advance HE and Wonkhe co-developed a PEST analysis (appended) capturing some of the macro changes to the external landscape and the ways that these are shaping public and student expectations of higher education.

A common theme across all three groups' discussions was a sense that higher education is at a pivot point in its history, with changing perceptions of where value is located in the higher education experience driven by political, economic, social and technological change. The discussion identified five critical tensions higher education leaders must navigate in pursuing and sustaining educational excellence:

- 1 Public trust versus sector autonomy: heightened political and public scrutiny and the need to evidence value visibly
- 2 Public good versus private ROI: reframing value narratives for students, employers and place
- 3 Traditional academic community and belonging versus new models of student: education design for a diverse and time-poor student body including commuters, carers and workers
- 4 Pace of technology (AI) versus change capacity: pedagogy, integrity and staff capability must evolve together
- 5 Distributed leadership versus accountability: enable many to act while clarifying lines of decision-making authority

In light of these shifts, and in different ways, all groups expressed the necessity of rearticulating the core values of academia for a changing environment. There was a sense that the scale of organisational change needed could strain or challenge existing institutional norms and practices in ways that could be disruptive, but that should ultimately be more inclusive of the breadth of stakeholders within and outside institutions.

However, the challenge of inclusive change is very strongly felt. The fragmentation of the sense of academic community was also a common observation, with students' lives becoming more complex, leaders trying to respond to external pressures and academic staffs' feeling of being sidelined or unheard, reducing their openness to engaging with change.

The issues may appear abstract, but they are leading to real and deeply-felt consequences for leaders, higher education staff and students. If higher education institutions are going to thrive in this new political and social landscape, they will need to invest, not only in appropriate strategic choices and innovation plans, but in the capabilities of their leaders to lead the change and transformation required.

The changes shaping higher education

Ahead of the round tables Wonkhe and Advance HE developed an analysis of the large scale changes confronting higher education in the political, economic, social and technological domains, which we used to spark discussion with participants, both in interrogating the analysis and adding to it, and in reflecting on the implications for educational excellence and institutional capability to create the conditions for it to happen.

We argued that changes in each of these domains would have implications for:

- 1 General public expectations of what higher education should look and feel like
- 2 What is taught and how in higher education courses
- 3 What sort of value higher education is expected to evidence
- 4 The core capabilities of the educator workforce and the organisations that employ them

These impacts need not be assumed to be fixed as singularly positive or negative, or as foregone conclusions – the value is in working through how these changes might unfold in different institutional contexts, what their effects might be on various stakeholders, and what an appropriate response might be.

An exercise like this cannot hope to capture the nuance and complexity of the changing external landscape, but for these conversations we found it a helpful tool, and reproduce it here in hopes it can support ongoing discussion within institutions.

For each domain we proposed a core theme to try to capture the aggregate effect of the various other changes we had identified.

Political: public trust versus sector autonomy

We suggested that there is a change in the perception of **the compact between the citizen and the state**, observable in a certain loss of confidence in national governments to either deliver high quality public services in-country or respond to global volatility and geopolitical permacrisis, especially in light of climate change and global warming. Trust in institutions is generally not robust, and political disaffection and populism, including among young people, is shaping mainstream political discourse.

In the UK, national and regional devolution has been perceived as a way to restore political confidence and engagement as, in its most idealised form, people are given much greater visibility and participation in decisions that affect them and their places. In practice, devolved arrangements are only as effective and democratic as the people and institutions involved in shaping them.

Higher education institutions will likely find themselves “in the frame” for the broader loss of confidence. Though not technically public services nor representative of the British state there is a distinctive history and culture of much higher education provision in the UK that tracks with developments in the state and its institutions (for example, the Church, the civil service, Empire, and the professions). Moreover, higher education is, to some degree, state-

funded in all UK jurisdictions, representing the notion that it remains the state's role to secure fair access to higher education as a general public good. Any perception that higher education as a sector is failing to act in the public interest therefore only fuels this distrust.

Higher education is also a potential locus for civil society: rational public discourse, the education of critical and engaged citizens, and the dissemination of skills and knowledge that can meaningfully address global challenges such as climate change. Devolution offers a more immediate – and potentially more meaningful – context for these potentials to be realised in practice. But doing so requires securing public consent and public belief in the value of this civic ethos.

Discussions focused on the political dilemmas facing higher education and the practices that can build or erode public trust.

Institutional leaders noted their students' deep concern for sustainability and inclusion and the need to respond to this to retain trust and reflect students' values. They observed the vital importance of maintaining trusted partnerships and external relationships for higher education institutions, including with further education colleges. One leader observed that the goal of higher education should be to create "interplay" between the external world and global challenges, local issues distinctive to the region, student context and lived experience, and the curriculum.

"[It's about] turning outwards – the university not acting as an island and being interconnected with its place."

Senior institutional leader

Principal fellows noted the connections between sustaining collaborative networks between higher education institutions and effective external advocacy of the value of higher education, with one citing the Scottish system as a good example. They observed that politically higher education is in a "competing interest" space in which policymakers may have strong opinions on what higher education should do and be, but when it comes to the crunch they tend to direct funding towards more universally experienced services like health and compulsory education.

Some expressed concerns about the ethics of some higher education practice, especially internationalisation, and whether it is legitimate to ask students from poorer countries to subsidise UK higher education. They also noted the erosion of national student leadership, pointing to a perceived reduction in influence of the National Union of Students. They also suggested that more broadly they had observed a change in young people's confidence "to be active decision-makers and agents and have advocacy."

“Universities are suffering an internal upheaval as they try and identify what their own purpose is, and I think are having a bit of an existential crisis at the moment, as there's a struggle between the idea of a university as having some intrinsic value as a repository of learning, and a site at which people can change the trajectories of their own lives by educating themselves, and a much more bureaucratic conceptualisation of a place of higher education as the equivalent of a corporation creating a product which is then marketed to masses...I don't think it's in any way coherent.”

Principal fellow

Student representatives discussed the ways that political trends manifest inside higher education institutions, the impact on students' political views and what they perceived as institutional naivety to the manifestation of populist views among students:

“Universities believe that students are exempt from the effects of public austerity. I think they believe that we are creating a community of highly educated people, therefore they cannot fall for the tricks and stories that the media or certain political parties are trying to tell the public to think about immigration or other key issues within society. I think it is a massive risk to universities to be naive, to think that students can't think these things or fall for these things. And I think currently they're being blind to it. I don't think they're tackling it. And I think it could have a really negative impact on student communities.”

Student representative

Economic: public good versus private ROI

Broader trends driving the economic situation confronting higher education including an aging population, legacy pensions arrangements, regional inequality and a national economy that has barely grown since the financial crisis of 2008. The cost of providing public services is increasing faster than tax revenues.

In this economic context, we suggested that the dominant economic lens for higher education is about **meeting expectations of “return on investment”** whether that is at the individual level in the form of the cost to students of accessing higher education matches the lived experience of study and students being assured of developing skills for future employment; or at societal level in the form of higher education's contribution to economic growth through skills and innovation and a growing focus on the degree to which higher education is being provided as efficiently as it could be.

The political tensions explored above can also be expressed in economic terms: higher education is expected to produce public benefits but increasingly without being able to rely on public funding to meet its core costs. The ability of institutions to realise private sources of finance – specifically via international recruitment – has masked this tension to some degree and may continue to do so. Still, there is a precarity to this income source and not all institutions can benefit from it. Institutions are, therefore, not only seeking to reduce costs – such strategies can only ever balance the books in the short term – but review their whole operating model to pursue long term sustainability.

For institutions, as with government, when finances are tight having a very strong sense of “value” becomes critical – with a limited financial envelope institutions have to be confident they are resourcing the things that create the kinds of educational excellence they wish to pursue and demonstrating this in ways that are meaningful to all stakeholders. The habit of characterising economic outcomes as being in opposition to academic goals and values may need to be overcome as institutions seek to find ways to secure both education excellence and economic value.

Within this context, the discussion at the student representatives round table was particularly apposite. The student representatives who attended expressed scepticism about whether higher education is really offering students value in the form of skills that can be applied in their future – particularly in the context of a highly competitive graduate jobs market.

“I’ve spoken to so many students over my past 18 months of being a sab[batical officer] and so many are saying that...the value of a degree is increasingly decreasing, and I’ve heard students physically say that an undergrad to them feels like the equivalent of an A level and a masters feels like the equivalent of an undergrad degree, and a PhD is a Masters, and there’s just this ladder that they can’t seem to catch up on, and it’s falling underneath them.”

Student representative

“Students are being taught how to meet learning objectives, but they’re not being taught how to transfer the skills that they get during their time at university, or sometimes it feels like they’re not even being taught the skills that they need just by meeting the learning objectives.”

Student representative

To some extent principal fellows echoed this sense among students of a disconnect between the investment in higher education and the expected outcome – tying the economic issue back to the theme of public trust.

“There are very few jobs. So students, particularly those from a WP background, can put generational money into getting an education which then doesn’t give them a job, and so they spend the rest of their life paying off a loan while they’re still hopefully, not working at Tesco’s stocking shelves. And I think that gets out into society, and then we lose the trust more broadly.”

Principal fellow

Principal fellows recognised the challenge of adapting pedagogy to realise value for students in different ways, discussing, for example, approaches to develop skills in students that “mean something outside their subject area.” An example given was about integrating entrepreneurship education into engineering or creative arts courses, recognising the realities of these industries. There was also discussion of how, practically, to make the abstract concept of skills “tangible” and “real” in curricula through applied learning.

There was a sense that “efficiency” efforts in institutions can sometimes focus too hard on cost-cutting and not enough on understanding where the value exists in the form of knowledge and expertise that could be deployed more widely:

“It's not just about shaking up and killing a few courses and culling a few academic staff and getting rid of loads of support services to overcome a deficit. It's really reactive thinking. And what we need to be doing is actually recognising the expertise within institutions and saying, ‘Where else can we apply this? And how do we stop tasks that are getting in the way of those skill areas being applied?’”

Principal fellow

Institutional leaders discussed the government’s forthcoming industrial strategy (then published in draft form), and the wider imperative to translate higher education’s knowledge assets into economic impact for communities. There was discussion of the likelihood of higher education becoming a more lifelong endeavour and institutions needing to engage people throughout their lives, delivering different modes of delivery at evening and weekends and meeting local skills needs. However, leaders also noted the challenge of competing with alternative providers offering flexible provision with a low cost base, illustrating some of the tension around the public role of much UK higher education and the realities of operating in a competitive landscape as a private entity. One response to this challenge was to become much more transparent about differentiation of ethos, model, and strategy of different kinds of institutions.

Both institutional leaders and principal fellows reflected on the importance of people as the core asset of the institution and the need to invest in their capabilities and actively consider their experience as part of any efficiency and cost-saving agenda. It was recognised that change agendas can neglect the human aspect and undervalue the expertise and experience of the “lead user.” A common theme was that good pedagogy requires a level of resource investment: stability of contracts, effective professional development provision, and carving out the time and space for educators to adapt their pedagogies.

“People are our most precious resource within universities, and we need to think about how we invest in them.”

Senior institutional leader

“What is important for me in all of this is we can't lose sight of optimisation of what it means to be a member of staff in one of our institutions, and how we make the lived experience optimal for our staff.”

Senior institutional leader

“Make space for conversations about pedagogy and innovation as this is what gets staff motivated and interested at work. You can't shift pedagogy if you don't create time.”

Principal fellow

Social: traditional academic community versus new models of student

In the social category we focused on how social trends are (re)shaping **the nature of higher education communities**. An obvious shift is in the scale and diversity of higher education provision, a trend that there is no reason to believe will change in the future; though the pace of growth may slow, the strong likelihood is that diversification of provision will continue. The driver (and corollary) for this is the greater diversity of students, with associated divergent expectations, prior educational expectations and lived experience.

As education becomes more widely available at higher levels it almost inevitably starts to serve a wider range of social purposes: for some students – typically younger, more traditional students – higher education may continue to meet a need for intellectual bridging into adulthood and self-discovery, while others may be more focused on acquiring the knowledge and skills required for specific careers. Different students will place a different value on the personal connections forged through a shared higher education experience, or through connections between their course and the workplace. Similarly, a broader student base, including a greater proportion with disabilities, requires a more inclusive curriculum and pedagogy to give all the best chance of academic and future success.

These various purposes are by no means mutually exclusive, though they do present a strategic challenge for programme design, curriculum and pedagogy. But there is also a paradox that institutions must navigate: that the educational value created by formal programmes of study is rooted in human connection, yet contemporary students are increasingly time-poor, working to support the costs of study and struggling to engage consistently with their learning. This can create a gulf between the values, beliefs and expectations of educators and those of students.

The changing student experience formed a core theme across all three groups. Senior leaders reported shared attendance and engagement challenges, driven by students' busy lives and, for some, commuting. Some suggested that students are taking a more "transactional" approach to higher education, while others reported observing "a lack of confidence" among students. There was a strong sense among some senior participants that while higher education institutions frequently claim to listen to students' voices, they remain poor at actively designing education around what is known about students' lives and experiences – particularly when those experiences are filtered through particular exclusions – or responding to students' expressed preferences.

"I'm trying to think of another sector that says, 'Here is what we see you need, and you should come to us because this is what you need.'"

Senior institutional leader

Principal fellows enlarged on this theme, with one commenting that they had observed a change from the idea of "student" as a core identity to study being something that individuals do alongside other things. Another commented that students come to university for an

“experience” – but they increasingly can’t afford that experience. Principal fellows argued that there can be a disconnect between academic identity and practice and lived reality of students’ lives, with one offering the frame of an academic desire to “replicate themselves rather than create something that meets students’ needs.”

“Our academics were the nerds in the class. They were the people that were deeply interested. They were the people that studied, attended everything, were deeply passionate about their research, deeply passionate about their subject, went on to the PhD. And now they are academic members of staff, they expect their student cohort to engage in that.”

Principal fellow

The student representative group also observed what they perceived as a degree of reticence among academic staff to adapting learning and teaching, with one attributing this to fear of change:

“Academics are so scared of moving away from what they know that the process is moving at a glacial pace. But there's little pockets of inspiration, I think, where people are slowly waking up to the idea that we should be moving a little bit more with the times.”

Student representative

Both the student representative group and the principal fellows group discussed a sense of a loss of community in their institutions. Student representatives identified an erosion of motivation among students driven by a sense that their futures could be highly uncertain:

“How can we be motivated when we keep getting told that the job market is awful? You can't expect young people to be motivated to enter a job market that is getting worse and worse and worse...Everybody's competing against each other and everyone is kind of fighting for themselves, and that also takes away so much from the community building.”

Student representative

Principal fellows attributed the loss of community to structural fragmentation inside universities that reduced the ability of staff to respond to a drop off in student engagement:

“One of the fundamental issues is that we do not have communities in our universities anymore, and that then impacts the students as well. And it's becoming worse because we then don't have engagement from the students. But also we don't have engagement from the academics, because they're in a mood all the time and fed up and tired and exhausted. The professional services are somewhere else in the university, so you can't have quick chats and things like that. And the trust has gone.”

Principal fellow

Technological: pace of change versus institutional capacity

Technology-driven changes do not only relate to the emergence and application of new kinds of technology – though the emergence of generative AI has obviously prompted deep discussions in higher education – but to the ways that technology drives changing expectations of human behaviour and capability. Industry needs and expectations of graduate skills change with technology, as do humans' content consumption habits and expectations of learning. The costs of technology can create new social divides and forms of privilege, while the greater availability of data produced by human-technology interactions creates new strategic opportunities and threats for higher education.

We suggested that higher education needs to confront the **changing collective sense of the human/machine interface** ie the ways humans occupy digital spaces and mobilise digital technology in physical spaces.

For all of the groups, the pace of change was a theme – student representatives worried that despite the strategies and frameworks they had seen that talk about preparing for the future, universities may not have the capability to change at the pace that could be required. Principal fellows noted that the pace of technology change and the demand for a response, particularly on AI, can mean that educational developers do not have the relevant expertise to develop practice among academic staff. Senior leaders raised the issue of digital divides and the risk that some students would inevitably be left less able to succeed due to having lower access to core technologies.

There was discussion about the positioning of students in a digital context – senior leaders and principal fellows were concerned with ideas of student agency and being active inhabitants of digital spaces rather than passive consumers of “content.” One principal fellow astutely observed that in a world where attention becomes currency in a digital media landscape the “killer service” from higher education will be more personal connection not less – not least because higher education neither has now nor is likely to gain the capability to produce “consumer-grade” prestige content with the production values students experience in their wider digital lives.

The role of technology in supporting efficiency also came up among senior leaders and principal fellows, with senior leaders referencing the frustrations of the legacy of inefficient manual data technology, and principal fellows querying institutional understanding of how to measure “efficiency” and evaluate the impact of automation.

The implications for future excellence

This project did not set out to define educational excellence or quality but to understand changes in how those concepts are socially produced within and outside higher education and support institutions in considering their response. A key insight from the discussion of the PEST analysis across all three groups was the widening of the range of purposes or intent of higher education, and an equivalent widening of the range of stakeholders in the question of the definition of education excellence. It is not hard to see how this changing dynamic can have an alienating effect on academics working in disciplines who may perceive some of their core “knowledge stewardship” values and purposes as being under threat from political, economic, social and technological changes in the external landscape driving different expectations of higher education.

Some may shy away from discussions of core purpose as being too abstract for the immediate strategic pressures of the current moment – but as an individual in the principal fellow group observed, if universities are having an “existential crisis” about their purpose it directly affects “academic identity and practice.” Arguably, the answers to many of the questions featured in the contemporary higher education debate can be boiled down to purpose: Who should go to higher education? What subject and study options should be available to them? Who should be responsible for funding? What responsibility do higher education institutions have for student wellbeing? What should the relationship between research and teaching be? The (unsatisfactory) answer is always, it depends what you think higher education is for.

But where purpose is contested, institutions' practical, real-world ability to enact that shift from a certain singularity of purpose to meeting multiple needs and expectations becomes much more challenging. For some institutions it may be a question of choosing a core primary purpose, while for others it might be about reconciling or managing the trade-offs of the competing demands of multiple purposes. Until you know your purpose(s) the notion of educational excellence remains incoherent.

Even where there is a strong sense of purpose, the means of achieving that purpose may need to change in response to external landscape shifts. The ability to adapt and innovate in the service of core values was picked up in the discussion among principal fellows:

“That's the slight dichotomy here is that the one true thing is the core educational value, but it has to constantly change...So you know that we constantly are allowing ourselves to have our minds changed as we work with new groups of people and students coming through because they, you know, they shockingly change all the time. And we need to respond to that and be happy about that.”

Principal fellow

Similarly, one senior leader reflected on the capabilities required from individual graduates in a rapidly changing world, and the necessity of those capabilities being manifested in higher

education institutional practice if the claim to develop them at the individual level is to have any ongoing credibility:

“We talk about what we want our students to be able to do when they graduate. We talk about how we need them to be change leaders, how we want them not to be resistant to change, how we want them to be resilient. But we're not necessarily good at being that ourselves and having workforces that are like that. So how do we start to redress that and [rise to that] challenge? ... Because until we start to tackle those things. I don't think we are going to be able to wrestle some of these other bigger questions around economics.”

Senior institutional leader

Across all three groups there was a strong sense that to navigate these complexities higher education institutions would need to develop some core organisational capabilities, geared around listening to and engaging student and staff communities and being prepared to handle the diversity and breadth of needs and expectations. There was a clear sense that fragmentation of the academic community can be a strategic weakness in the sector – leading to brittle and cautious leadership, frustrated staff, and disengaged students. Notably, all the groups expressed a sense of disenfranchisement – all felt to some degree that they were limited in their capacity for action by the human fears and timidity of others, or by structural or cultural barriers, and there was a palpable longing to experience a sense of a collective, connected response.

“I think students feel like they don't have any agency, and...because everything happens to them. Yeah, it's the reactive nature of universities. Now that things happen to universities, so the university creates things that happen to students rather than it being a collective process.”

Student representative

“We've been a bit slapped down recently, and we're in a situation where we want to protect our jobs. And I think when you're feeling protective of yourself and your family and your home, and so on, of course you don't want to go out [and start a fight], but you know there is a sense of a wartime footing here, and there's nothing better to bring out the collaborative possibilities that we've got between us.”

Principal fellow

Leading for excellence

In a sense the recommendations emerging from the discussion all flow to higher education leaders, because it is a core role of leaders to engage staff, to make sense of complex situations, and to take responsibility for making decisions.

But it's also very clear that, in line with earlier research Advance HE and Wonkhe have undertaken on higher education leadership and change, that small executive teams cannot be expected to maintain a grip on every aspect of the changing landscape and the impact on the various stakeholders, and that where that expectation exists, the falling short of it only

contributes to this wider sense of disenfranchisement. As such, distributing leadership throughout institutions remains a critical job for the sector.

One senior leader drew a parallel between higher education's purpose and the distributed leadership model:

"It's really important to empower individuals at whatever stage they're at and have a sort of almost a distributed leadership approach and start having different styles of leadership, so that actually, when resources are constrained as they always are you empower people to make a difference and to make a change, you give them the confidence to do that, whether they're staff or students, or even partners, and empower them to do that. And I think that is something that, as an overarching sort of emergent property of universities, that they can do that for individuals, whatever career or life path they're taking. And I think that's something that we shouldn't lose sight of, and try and get ahead of the game and equip our students and our staff to be ready to address these challenges and turn them into opportunities."

Senior institutional leader

Principal fellows felt that the model of leadership in higher education remains conservative, and that leaders (while they may face intense scrutiny) remain unaccountable to staff and students and are perceived to have a low understanding and appreciation of how things "really" are. One ask of institutional leaders was to draw more systematically on knowledge within the institution to inform decisions, whether in the form of academic expertise or individuals working close to the problem.

Leaders, in this formulation, do not attempt to become authorities in all the various challenges their institution may be facing, but deploy their skills in listening carefully to lived experience of staff and students, connecting up different parts of the institution, and curating inclusive processes that generate solutions. A corollary to this change in mindset would be that leaders have the confidence to admit that situations are challenging and seek help – a cultural shift that, if led from the top, could reduce the pressure on others to hide their struggles to cope.

"Leaders often talk too much and listen too little. Listening without feeling the need to come back with a definitive answer every time."

Principal fellow

Principal fellows also felt that at an individual and system level there needs to be a higher level of capability in change management, including developing staff to assess issues and come up with contextualised solutions, rather than simply copying established practice elsewhere. One critical role for leaders was seen as supporting those who had been tasked with oversight of change, with one principal fellow citing an example of a designated "change agent" quickly burning out due to a lack of support:

“A colleague of mine was looking at what universities advertise for when they're looking at leadership at different levels, about how they want innovators, change agents. It's fascinating – they don't want those amazing change agents. You look at how long they stay in those roles, and that they quickly become quite disaffected. So they want change. But they don't want change.”

Principal fellow

Among both student representatives and principal fellows there were reflections on the value and power of co-creation as a way of tackling emerging complex challenges. One principal fellow asked, “where are the spaces that VCs and DVCs meet with course and programme leaders to discuss the challenges and opportunities in our own institutions?” Another suggested that staff development could take the form of applied co-creation – discussing policy and then creating it together “on the spot.”

Student representatives were particularly thoughtful about where student voice sits in co-creation, recognising that when student input is not well thought through the experience of being asked to contribute can feel more alienating than empowering, with one noting “You can't use students to prop up the backbone of unpopular decisions.”

Another suggested, having clearly given the matter a great deal of prior thought, that student involvement in co-creation should be in developing deep appreciation of the problem at the start of the process, rather than being asked to comment on pre-developed “expert” solutions from a position of relative lack of knowledge and experience:

“I think it's completely backwards, the way that we speak to students about changes. Changes are designed obviously by the experts. And then, what, 50 maximum students have spoken about this change. And then they go, ‘oh, well, we could change this, all right, good point from one student,’ and then it's not representative [of the breadth of student experiences]. It's not necessarily conducive to the best change possible to do it in that order. I think it would be hard to do, but completely flip that on its head and start with students and then build off what students are saying rather than tag it on to the end and be performative. I think give them more space at the beginning of that process, holding space at the beginning of that process. The experts in the student experience are giving their opinion from the very beginning, and not [being expected to give their views] as an [expert] adult. That would be my pitch.”

Student representative

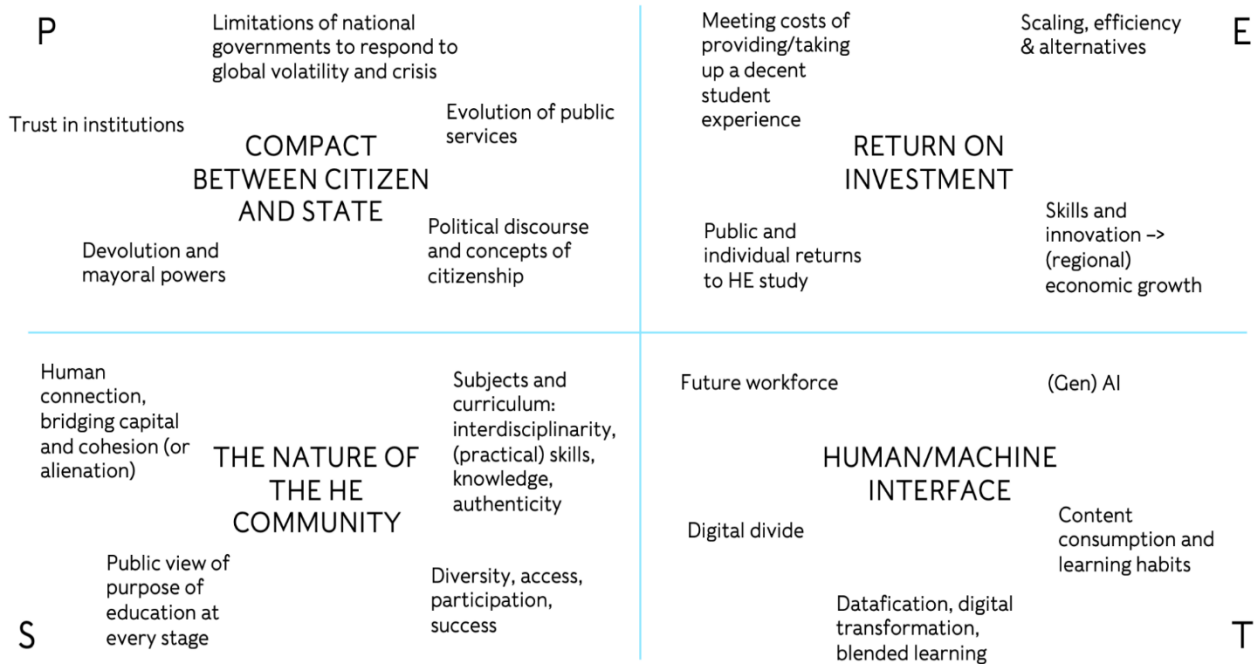
Conclusion

Higher education institutions may be increasingly cash-strapped but they have a great deal of resource available in the form of the knowledge, energy and insight of their staff, students, and partners, if the leadership, systems and skillsets exist to mobilise that resource. The breadth and diversity of higher education institutions, their staff, students and stakeholders is an enormous strength of the system as a whole and part of what makes it excellent. But that strength from diversity emerges from the forging and sustaining of common causes despite differences, not from the existence of differences per se.

In our groups there was, perhaps surprisingly, very little discussion of regulatory or legal barriers to institutional action, though institutions do often feel those constraints. As the higher education sector continues to evolve and develop responses to the changes it is facing there will be an even greater need for sophisticated regulatory frameworks that are both robust in their pursuit of excellence and flexible about the means of achieving it.

The future can never be fully known, and so institutions have to be able to be confident of their purpose(s) and the educational ethos that informs their understanding of what excellence looks like in achieving that purpose. The anticipation of and response to specific changes and challenges, whether political, economic, social, technological, or environmental can only ever really be forged in dialogue between the various perspectives and needs that contemporary higher education institutions have to manage. The ability to “hold space” for that dialogue, and actively develop the practices that allow for the co-creation and implementation of solutions, is therefore a critical institutional capability.

Appendix: the PEST analysis



The changing external landscape has implications for: 1) expectations of what HE should look and feel like 2) what is taught and how 3) what sort of value higher education is required to evidence and 4) the core capabilities of the educator workforce and the organisations that employ them.

Contact us

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Advance HE helps HE institutions be the best they can be, by unlocking the potential of their people.

We are a member-led, sector-owned charity that works with institutions and higher education across the world to improve higher education for staff, students and society. We are experts in higher education with a particular focus on enhancing teaching and learning, effective governance, leadership development and tackling inequalities through our equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) work.

Our strategic goals to enhance confidence and trust in HE, address inequalities, promote inclusion and advance education to meet the evolving needs of students and society, support the work of our members and the HE sector.

We deliver our support through professional development programmes and events, Fellowships, awards, student surveys and research, providing strategic change and consultancy services and through membership (including accreditation of teaching and learning, equality charters, knowledge and resources).

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