



WIG

The Whitehall & Industry Group
connecting the sectors



'Society' Series

What's Next for Higher Education in the UK?

17 November, 2020

Expert Insight

We were joined by Professor Sir Chris Husbands, Vice-Chancellor of Sheffield Hallam University, for a webinar discussing what lies ahead for the UK's higher education sector. Sir Chris' presentation covered five broad areas; the history and current 'state of play' in the sector, demographic shifts, economic factors, students, and funding.



He touched upon points including:

- Growth in higher education around the world has been fueled by a desire to drive forward innovation, and economic competitiveness.
- The higher education sector is a big success story for the UK, however universities have received mixed reports in the press recently; for example criticisms around responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, or the perception that grades are being inflated, versus recognition for the enormous contribution institutions such as Oxford and Imperial have made to biomedical research.
- The mode of delivery of universities hasn't changed much in hundreds of years, the gap between this traditional method and student or societal expectations has been getting bigger. As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, universities have had to catch-up at speed.
- Institutions cannot revert to the old approach, in part as the workplace for which universities are supposed to prepare students has fundamentally changed. What are the implications for the UK's largely residential model?
- UK higher education has received a net benefit from EU membership, through research funds from programs such as 'Horizon 2020'. Our exit from the EU potentially leaves a significant hole in research funding.

Presentation Spotlight

Sir Chris shared a number of illuminating statistics to give context to his insights:

- In 2018 there were 132 universities in the UK, almost a 300% increase in under 30 years, from 46 in 1990.
- The UK has a huge range in scale of institutions; from research intensive Russel Group universities with up to 40,000+ students, to an increasing number of specialist universities.
- UK export earnings from international student fees are larger than the UK pharmaceutical industry.
- Figures from The Economist show that globally, enrolment in tertiary education increased sixfold from 1970 - 2012
- Having seen an enormous increase in demand since 2000, China now has the world's biggest tertiary education system, with 47% of school leavers going into higher education last year.

Our members' questions

WIG members from across the sectors participated in the session, and posed some challenging questions.

Key issues raised included:

- Whether universities need to do more to assert their relevance, and the value they add to the UK; both in terms of the skills that students acquire, and the research outcomes universities achieve.
- The extent to which the higher education sector in the UK is dependent on international students, and the impact that both Brexit and the COVID-19 pandemic might have on those numbers.
- The role of universities in achieving the UK's R&D investment target of 2.4% GDP.
- Whether we might see some mergers, federations, or even insolvencies as the sector adapts to new realities.

WIG members can listen to Sir Chris' presentation [here](#)
To see our full programme of webinars, visit www.wig.co.uk