

**Westminster Higher Education Forum policy conference:
Next steps for UK universities and their local economies**

Timing: Morning, Morning, Friday, 8th May 2026

*****Taking place online*****



**WESTMINSTER
HIGHER EDUCATION
FORUM**

Draft agenda subject to change

- 8.30 Registration
- 9.00 **Chair's opening remarks**
Senior Parliamentarian
- 9.05 **Assessing the role of universities in local innovation and supporting skills pipelines**
Greg Wade, Head, Innovation Policy, Universities UK
Questions and comments from the floor
- 9.30 **Key considerations for developing the role of universities in local development and skills planning**
increasing HEI engagement with Local Skills Improvement Plans and collaboration with local authorities and FE | strategies to attract inward investment | convening regional innovation ecosystems | supporting Industrial Strategy alignment | aligning institutional strategies with devolved funding and combined authority priorities | data, metrics, and evaluation frameworks for HE impact | supporting lifelong learning | university contributions to wider policy goals, including the Youth Guarantee and Growth and Skills Levy | flexible curricula and labour market responsiveness | potential impact of the English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill
Professor Lisa Collins, Pro Vice Chancellor, Research and Innovation, University of Surrey
Senior representative, local authority
Senior representative, employer
Senior representative, further education
Questions and comments from the floor
- 10.15 **Developing university civic engagement and strategies to support local needs**
Richard Brabner, Visiting Professor, Civic Engagement, Newcastle University; and former Director, UUP Foundation
Questions and comments from the floor
- 10.50 **Chair's closing remarks**
Senior Parliamentarian
- 10.55 Break
- 11.05 **Chair's opening remarks**
Senior Parliamentarian
- 11.10 **Developing regional innovation ecosystems and supporting cluster development**
Senior representative, innovation cluster
- 11.20 **University collaboration and supporting commercialisation, spin-outs and knowledge transfer**
options for improving the design of shared university services and new partnership models | strengthening university-industry collaboration and technology transfer | pathways for creating and scaling spin-outs and start-ups | regional networks to support entrepreneurs and emerging businesses | measuring the impact of knowledge transfer on local employment and innovation | developing partnerships between universities, investors, emerging businesses, and local authorities | supporting university financial sustainability through commercialisation | alignment with the AI Opportunities Action Plan and regional AI infrastructure
Ravi Takhar, CEO, Bexhill UK
Dr Omer Omar, CEO and Co-Founder, Apoello
Senior representative, university
- 11.40 Questions and comments from the floor
- 12.00 **Widening higher education access and community engagement**
priorities for widening access and addressing HE cold spots | promoting social mobility and inclusion through outreach and skills programmes | community engagement and partnerships | addressing local challenges | leveraging research and innovation to tackle pressing societal and economic challenges | assessing rollout of the lifelong learning entitlement and priorities for reskilling | utilising labour market intelligence to inform local HE provisions
Rachel Nicholson, Head, Institution, Academy of Live Technology; and Member, IHE Board
Professor Graeme Atherton, Associate Pro-Vice-Chancellor, Regional Engagement; Vice Principal, Ruskin College; and Head, Ruskin Institute for Social Equity, University of West London
Michelle Burton, Head, Employability and Skills, West Yorkshire Combined Authority
Senior representative, employer
- 12.20 Questions and comments from the floor
- 12.45 **Policy priorities for strengthening university contributions to local economic strategy**
Senior representative, policy
Questions and comments from the floor
- 13.10 **Chair's and Westminster Higher Education Forum closing remarks**
Senior Parliamentarian
Sean Cudmore, Westminster Higher Education Forum