STRATEGIC PLAN 2018-2021
Universities Scotland aims to be the most effective policy and advocacy organisation in Scotland, supporting our members’ success.

ABOUT US

Universities Scotland is an association of the leaders of all of Scotland’s higher education institutions. Its advisory, representative and executive functions are carried out by staff who work to represent and campaign on behalf of Scotland’s higher education sector. Our ability to do this depends on close working relationships with Principals, as our members, and the institutions they lead. We are proud that Universities Scotland represents every higher education institution in Scotland. That puts us in a very strong position and makes our advocacy compelling.
PROFESSOR ANDREA NOLAN
CONVENER

I am delighted to be re-elected leader of Universities Scotland as we enter a new Strategic Plan period. I have been proud to be a part of Universities Scotland’s success throughout my time as a Principal, first of all leading work on research and innovation and more recently as Convener.

Uncertain political times only heighten the need for a membership organisation that is strong, ambitious and a trusted voice.

I am pleased that as we look towards the future we can do so in the knowledge that Universities Scotland will be tireless in making the case for excellent, competitive and inclusive higher education.

ALASTAIR SIM
DIRECTOR

It is a privilege to work for the leadership of 19 of Scotland’s most impactful organisations, and to head up a team of committed professionals who have done a great deal to create the policy, legislative and financial conditions for higher education’s success.

Every plan period brings its new challenges and opportunities. The foundations we have already built enable us to look at 2018-21 as a time of opportunity to project the university sector’s national and global ambitions, to build trust in the sector and to position higher education as a central force for the common good. We know that it will also be a time of challenge, as we adapt to as yet uncertain relationships with our European neighbours and as we continue to live through a period of austerity.

We need to constantly refresh how we work. The new plan points towards new ways of doing business which can better utilise the talents of our members, their institutions and our staff. I look forward to three years of confidence, innovation and impact.
OUR VISION FOR 2030

Higher education is recognised as:

- A world leader in education, research and innovation.
- A vital source of Scotland’s strength in a competitive, connected and collaborative world.
- A core part of Scotland’s identity as a prosperous, inclusive and outward looking nation.

OUR CONTEXT

Over the long term, we want to help members achieve their vision for higher education to 2030. Our strategy for 2018-2021 will lay the groundwork for the role that Universities Scotland will play in supporting its achievement.

During the three years of our next strategy we will face opportunities and challenges.

Amongst the opportunities:

- As Scotland and the UK look to focus on growth, we think that this creates opportunities for higher education as an enabler of growth.
- The early days of the Strategic Board for Skills and Enterprise create opportunities to demonstrate the crucial role of higher education in promoting sustainable economic growth.
- The Scottish elections in 2021 will create opportunities to work across the political spectrum to build consensus on policies that will support higher education.

Amongst the challenges:

- Addressing the scale of mental health challenges faced by students. We want to ensure we provide a safe and respectful environment for students to live and learn.
- Potential change to make the USS pension scheme sustainable could be costly for institutions to manage and could risk further industrial action.
- Universities are vulnerable to the anti-expert mentality that has surfaced in the UK and the continued erosion of public trust in institutions including major charities;
- The uncertainty posed by Brexit serves as the backdrop to all of this.
Within that context we have identified a set of four overarching priorities that will shape what we deliver for members over the next three years. Three of the priorities relate to our policy and advocacy work. The other relates to the ways in which we operate as an organisation. Change here, should amplify all we can offer as a membership organisation and as a place to work. We will share more detailed, annual plans with members. Our priorities are:

- AMBITION
- THE COMMON GOOD
- TRUST
- NEW WAYS OF WORKING
01 AMBITION

• To influence a trajectory of real terms growth in public investment in higher education. Scottish higher education must move towards a sustainable and internationally-competitive public funding platform.

• To put greater emphasis on developing more proactive policies and to set the policy agenda for higher education in Scotland to a much greater extent.

• To secure wide and cross-party political support for our policy and funding objectives going into the 2021 Scottish elections. Support for higher education in party manifestos would be a clear demonstration of this.

• To ensure that tuition fee and other funding changes in England, following the Augar review, continue to work for the cross-UK mobility of students and the financial sustainability of Scottish institutions.

• To achieve support from the Enterprise and Skills Strategic Board for the goals in our vision, so that higher education is regarded as a vital source of strength for Scotland and as a core part of Scotland’s identity as a prosperous, inclusive and outward looking nation.

• To work with our members and all partners to maximise the benefits of the UK Industrial Strategy in Scotland. If institutions can match their performance in UK-wide research competitions with equivalent success in the Industrial Strategy this could be worth an additional £350 million per year for business-led innovation in Scotland.

• To secure policy and funding outcomes to create the best possible environment for research to take place. This is essential to research excellence and will be central to meeting the ambitious research goals of both the UK and Scottish Governments. Achieving those goals will require a huge increase in the number of researchers. In order to attract and retain those researchers we need to offer the right environment, the right policy and immigration framework and ensure that UK-wide organisations such as URKI are working effectively for Scotland.

• To support our members to increase their global reach and impact following Brexit. We want the rest of the world to view Scottish higher education as a partner of choice for teaching and research partnerships, staff and student mobility.
02 THE COMMON GOOD

• To support delivery of all 15 actions in Working to Widen Access and support our members to take a big step towards the 2021 Blueprint for Fairness milestone that students from SIMD20 data zones should be 10 per cent of all undergraduate entrants at all institutions.

• To raise awareness of the significant sector-wide changes to university admissions and transitions in Scotland so that prospective students, their parents, teachers and advisors know about them and are encouraged to apply to university in greater numbers.

• To develop our policy in ways that recognise that every student comes with their own experience and their own needs from university and empowers them to follow their own path through it.

• To support institutions to do more as a key part of their regions, as anchor institutions, rooted locally and delivering local impact – be that social, cultural or economic benefit - often because of the institutions’ global profile and connections. The Scottish regional partnerships and UK Shared Prosperity Fund bring opportunities for universities to be key partners.

• To give more visibility to the other extensive and positive roles that universities have in their communities and wider society, far beyond those who ever work or study in a university.

• To increasingly identify where the higher education sector can work collaboratively to make a substantial contribution to societal challenges such as changing demographics or climate change.

• To build more and wider partnerships with organisations and influencers where we share values and objectives.
To demonstrate that higher education leaders can be trusted to address big issues of political and societal concern including gender equality, mental health and wider access to university.

To be alert to the need for change and to drive it on our own terms to continuously improve the contribution higher education makes to society and the economy. In doing so the sector will embody responsible autonomy and demonstrate it is a model that works well for all partners.

To be open to political and stakeholder views about the sector. To recognise we will sometimes hold different perspectives from our many stakeholders but to keep dialogue open at all times. This will strengthen the rigour and relevance of our policy development and give us a fuller understanding of the perspectives others hold about higher education and senior leaders.
To deliver on our strategic goal to become the most effective policy and advocacy organisation in Scotland and achieve our strategic priorities for members, we will adopt new ways of working as a team of staff.

Universities Scotland starts from a strong basis of committed members, talented staff and respect from our stakeholders. We will build on that strong foundation and on our existing values which remain highly relevant.

We believe a new focus in the following areas will help to make Universities Scotland organisationally fit for new challenges and position us well to be the best we can be for our membership:

4 NEW WAYS OF WORKING

i. A closer relationship with members
ii. Staff contribution and development
iii. Enhancing our effectiveness
iv. Working smarter.

OUR VALUES

We are a confident, creative organisation that puts its emphasis on learning and integrity to achieve a positive and significant impact for our members.
i. A closer relationship with members

- **Deeper understanding of the sector’s diversity.** We want to have a detailed understanding of the needs and diversity of our members so that we can better anticipate what this means for the practicalities of policy implementation. Our work will be shaped by the issues where there is strong and shared interest amongst the membership.

- **Inspiration.** We need to take more opportunities to be inspired by the work our members do. We need to channel more of their inspiring work into our work and create time to be re-energised by the amazing sector we represent.

- **Feedback.** We start this strategic plan period with a survey of members’ views about our performance which we will use to track progress towards our strategic goal as well as keep our focus on what matters most to our members. There will be a clear thread from member feedback through to actions taken.

- **A two-way relationship.** Our interaction with members will be based on mutual respect for the different professional expertise of members and US staff, commitment to high professional standards, and an openness to constructive challenge, in both directions, between members and the officer team.

ii. Staff contribution and development

- **We will recruit and retain talent appropriate to our diverse roles and will introduce succession and progression planning as far as is possible in an organisation of small scale.**

- **Learning is one of our core values so we will support staff with a programme of continuing professional development. Where we don’t have the financial resources to meet our ambitions for CPD, we will offer more time for development with a new commitment to a staff entitlement to six days of CPD every year.**

- **We want to support more opportunities for outward mobility for our staff from everything from day visits and shadowing in institutions to secondment opportunities. This will support our understanding of institutional practice, to inform policy and campaign development and advocacy.**

- **We will tighten the definition of ‘priority’ in US operational plans and in staff objectives so staff have greater clarity of purpose and we can better demonstrate what we have achieved.**
iii. Enhancing our effectiveness

- **Making the evidence work for us.** We pride ourselves on being an evidence-based and information-rich organisation. We will adopt new systems to curate data and evidence, prevent information overload and ensure greater consistency across our outputs. We will focus on clarity over quantity of communication with our members and with our staff.

- **Refreshed Committees.** We want to ensure we are getting the most we possibly can out of our committee model, which is time intensive for everyone involved. We will experiment with new approaches. We’d like to minimise the paperwork and make increased use of presentations, round-table discussions and online debate where this can promote a better quality of discussion than a paper. We may also make more use of the Lead Member role without Committee and more use of task-and-clear-finish groups to address challenges that cross the thematic boundaries of committees.

- **Issues that flow from our priorities.** We’re increasingly drawn into important areas of work that don’t map neatly onto our committee or internal structures. Mental health and gender based violence are two recent examples. We’ll look to do more work across staff teams and will review whether the existing committee and staff structure is correct for the changing demands on the organisation.

- **Measuring impact.** We will integrate the measurement of impact into all our campaigns.

- **Financial forecasts.** We will embed new financial procedures including a five-year financial forward look as part of our goal to build up reserves and responsibly live within our means.

iv. Working smarter

- **Tapping into talent.** We’d like to draw on the talent in our member institutions more frequently and effectively to lead our projects more often if they require specialist knowledge beyond that which we have in-house. We want to explore whether members are open to staff ‘loans’ to lead on time-limited and focused pieces of work.

- **More alignment.** Where it makes sense to do so, we would like to have closer relationships with UUK, Universities Wales and colleagues in Northern Ireland. This should help to maximise opportunities but still be respectful of our independence and different contexts. This might include joint campaigns, the scope to amplify our voice on reserved matters by working with Universities Wales and institutions in Northern Ireland as well as getting the most amount of benefit from the policy teams in UUKI to support internationalisation.

- **Resources.** Member subscriptions will remain our main source of income; it helps us to keep our focus. We will take a modest approach to the rate of members’ subscription and try to supplement this from other sources where there is a close fit between values and objectives.

- **Our spending priorities.** We aim to gradually grow our level of uncommitted resources over the strategy period, as well as build our reserves to three months, so we have greater capacity to commission more research to develop new policy, to run more ambitious campaigns and to draw in specialist and external advice where needed.

- **Infrastructure.** We will refresh our IT systems to ensure effectiveness and security and make greater use of online platforms and software to improve our workflow, our project management and evaluation. Our location on Holyrood Road is a good base but as we approach the end of our lease in 2022, our priority will be planning for an affordable, flexible space that meets our needs.