



Higher Education branch guidance

LOBBYING MPs ON THE HIGHER EDUCATION FUNDING CRISIS

Background

Higher education is in crisis. The combination of tuition fees, Brexit, declining international student numbers — exacerbated by the last government's hostile environment towards immigration — and inflationary pressure has placed some universities in incredibly challenging circumstances. Across the sector, we are seeing cuts and redundancies at an alarming rate, and UNISON members are feeling the devastating effects of closures, cutbacks, and withdrawal of services. An estimated 70 institutions are reducing staffing numbers to cut costs. And even prior to the current situation, our members have seen their pay and conditions decline continuously for the past fourteen years. Since 2010, the pay our members receive has reduced by 28% in real terms (because the gap between RPI inflation growth and HE pay growth between 2010 and 2024 was 28%), with an alarming 75% of our members telling us in 2024 they were concerned about coping with the cost of living and affording necessities such as food, energy, and housing. The Office for Students expects that in 2025-26, 72% of universities could be spending more money than they have coming in.

The Higher Education Service Group Executive is encouraging HE branches to contact your local members of parliament to lobby for more funding for higher education and for the development of a long-term solution to the HE funding crisis. UNISON urges the adoption of a funding model that moves away from fees and marketisation, and towards universities as a public service, at the centre of communities, that supports education and opportunity for all. Further increases in tuition fees, whilst providing short-term relief for university finances, will not solve the challenges that marketisation of the sector has brought. The best way to achieve long term financial security is to have universities funded through progressive taxation. We cannot build a truly sustainable higher education system that relies on winners and losers, and we urge the government to be ambitious to bring about a higher education system that will ensure opportunity for all for generations to come.

Contacting your MP

Lobbying your MP is an effective way to raise concerns about higher education funding. MPs hold significant power and influence, making decisions that affect all aspects of our lives. Their support can help generate media coverage for campaigns and put pressure on relevant bodies to prioritise higher education funding. Building regular contact with your MP will help establish a rapport and keep higher education funding at the top of the agenda.

UNISON branches are encouraged to contact the MPs that cover constituencies that universities serve. To find the MPs you need to contact, you can enter the campus postcode [here](#). Once you have found your MP, you can use the contact information provided to request a meeting to discuss the impact of the higher education funding crisis on your local area.

MPs receive hundreds of letters and emails each day. To be the most effective, your letter should be:

- Concise – introduce yourselves, give some context, and ask for a meeting
- Polite – you are representing all your local UNISON members, be sure to use appropriate and polite language
- Clear – make it clear what you are asking for, and the next steps

Below is a template letter that you can adapt for your local area. The more you can tailor it to the individual MP the better.

Dear [MP Name],

Re: Request for Meeting to Discuss the Higher Education Funding Crisis

I am writing on behalf of the UNISON [University Name] Branch, representing [number] support and professional staff at [University Name] in your constituency.

Our branch committee would like to request a meeting with you to discuss the ongoing crisis in higher education funding and its significant impact on our local community, economy, and the future of higher education provision in [local area].

As you may be aware, the higher education sector is facing unprecedented financial challenges. Many institutions are implementing restructuring programs and cost-saving measures that threaten both the quality of education and the livelihoods of university staff.

This crisis has particular significance for [local area] as [University Name] is a major employer and economic contributor to our region. The potential consequences include:

*Job losses affecting hundreds of local families
Reduced educational opportunities for local residents
Diminished research capacity and innovation potential
Significant economic impact on local businesses and services*

As our elected representative, your understanding of this situation and advocacy on our behalf would be invaluable. We hope to share our firsthand experiences of how these challenges are affecting staff, students, and the wider community, as well as discuss constructive approaches to addressing the funding crisis.

We would be grateful if you could suggest some dates when you might be available for a meeting, either at your constituency surgery or at the university campus.

Thank you for your consideration. We look forward to your response.

Yours sincerely,

[Name]

On behalf of the UNISON [University Name] Branch Committee

Contact details: [email] | [phone number]

Your MP may offer to meet you in their constituency office, where they hold advice surgeries, or in Westminster. Advice surgeries usually take place on Fridays and sometimes at the weekends. Details of your MP's constituency surgery can be found on their website.

Preparing for the meeting

Research your MP, make sure you know what they think about the issue generally and use this to your advantage. Plan out your strategy before you meet them. There is little point wading in with an argument that the MP will completely disregard. Think about what you are going to say and how you are going to use statistics and facts at your disposal.

Before meeting your MP, decide who from your branch will attend. Prepare a clear agenda that includes introducing your branch and the UNISON HE Funding campaign, explaining UNISON's position on higher education funding, providing background on current issues, and asking your MP to take specific actions. MPs may not have detailed knowledge about higher education funding systems, so avoid using sector-specific terminology.

You can read your MP's contributions in Parliament through their profile page on [the Parliament website](#). It may be worth researching statements or questions they've made about higher education and universities in the past.

Key points to make

Your MP will expect you to put forward a rational and evidenced position. Make sure you explain the detrimental impact that the funding crisis is having on their constituents. Make sure your communication is clear, ordered and to the point. Key points and areas of discussion can include:

Focus on the local picture to begin with

- Talk about how financial challenges are hurting the local universities. Speak from your members' experiences about the challenges they are facing around pay, redundancies and the cost of living. Talk about areas where your institution has already made cutbacks and the consequences of these decisions. It is likely that your institution is one of the larger employers in the region and cuts can have serious consequences for the local community.

The national picture

- Reaffirm that ever higher tuition fees are not the answer. Continuously mounting debt upon students is not a long-term solution. The results of the marketized system of higher education is evident with so many experiencing financial challenges. It is worth pointing out that the recent increase in undergraduate fees will be almost cancelled out by the increased national insurance contributions that universities will face. You can also highlight the discrepancy between universities and other areas of the public sector who are receiving financial assistance to manage the NI increase. The public expect politicians to safeguard the future of our universities, as the consequences of inaction could have lasting impacts. Politicians who see universities close on their watch will not be forgiven.

Staff pay and workforce challenges

- The workforce crisis in higher education is becoming increasingly evident, with support staff bearing a significant amount of the strain. Significantly, 66% of support employees say they have worked above their contracted hours without receiving overtime pay, and 63.4% say their workload has increased in the last 12 months. Additionally, 50.7% of employees have seen team reductions, mostly as a result of either redundancies or unfilled positions. A startling 60.6% of employees believe their employers undervalue them, and 78% are worried about

their own job security. The financial pressure is also taking its toll, with 71.5% of staff feeling that their pay no longer keeps up with the rising cost of living, underscoring the growing dissatisfaction and insecurity within the sector. Any future funding model for higher education must include a plan to tackle the erosion of pay and conditions for support staff within the sector.

A lack of action comes at a cost

- For too long governments have continuously kicked the HE funding can down the road. We have reached a crisis point that requires bold leadership. The university sector is one of the UK's greatest economic and social assets and will face further ruin without intervention and reform. We want it made clear to the Treasury and Department for Education that universities are crucial to helping the government meet its ambitions, and that this problem requires ambitious leadership.

The UK should adopt a progressive funding model for higher education

- Tuition fees represent a fundamental view of higher education as a private consumer good rather than a public investment with widespread societal benefits. By shifting the financial burden onto individual students, we create unnecessary barriers to participation while saddling graduates with substantial debt that constrains their economic choices for decades. Funding universities through general taxation would recognise that an educated population generates collective advantages through increased tax revenues, greater innovation, improved public health outcomes, and stronger civic engagement – benefits that extend far beyond the individual graduate. Countries like Germany, Norway, and Finland demonstrate viable alternative models in which higher education is viewed as a public good and funded accordingly. This approach would also eliminate the marketisation of universities that has led to concerning trends like grade inflation, reduced academic standards, and the prioritisation of lucrative courses over socially valuable ones. Ultimately, replacing tuition fees with funding from progressive taxation represents not merely a financial restructuring but a recommitment to education as a societal cornerstone that should be equally accessible regardless of the student's socioeconomic background.

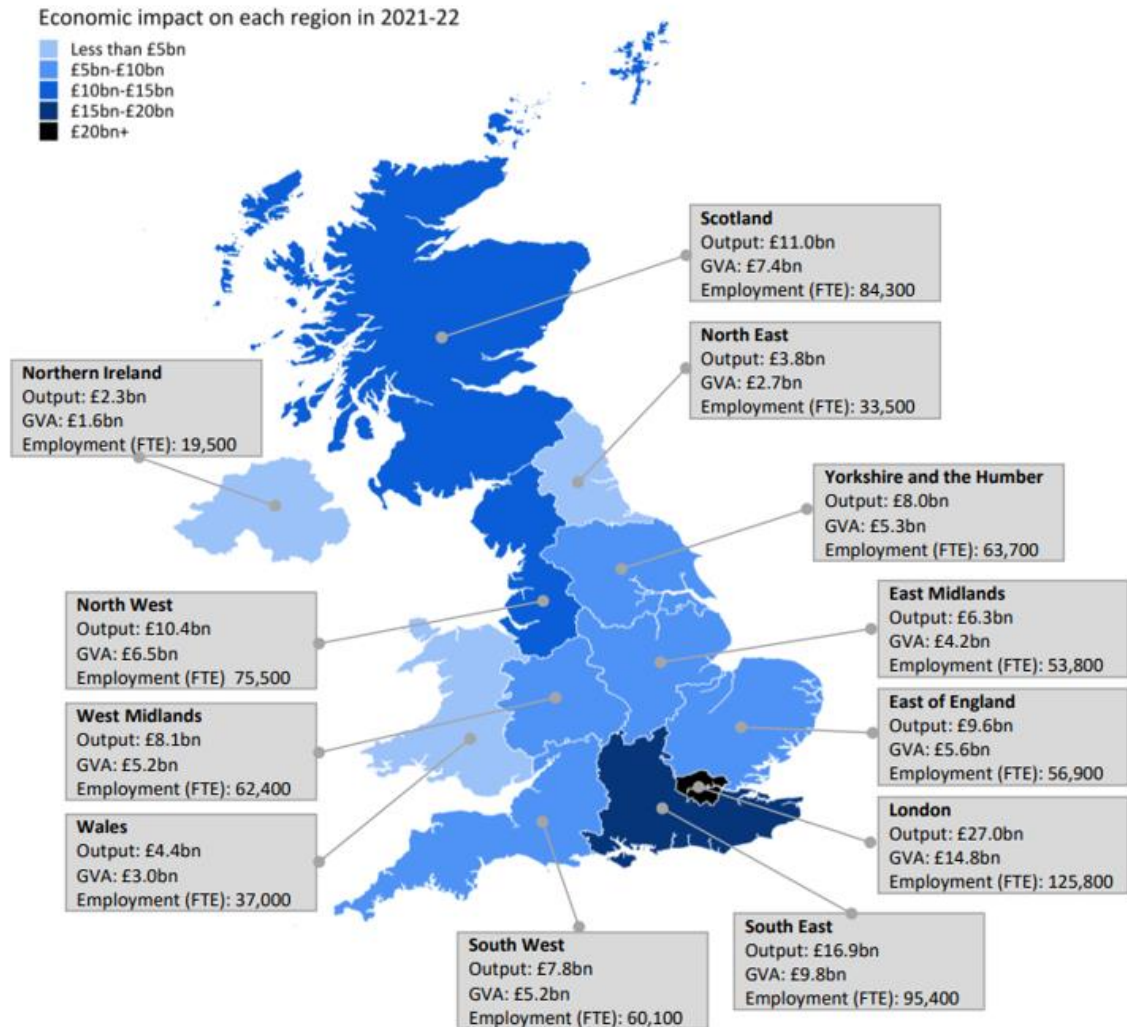
University improvements and efficiencies

- Universities can make improvements and become more efficient, but in many institutions this work has been occurring for years due to financial challenges, and there is a major concern that 'efficiencies' means cutting jobs. Greater efficiencies need to focus on areas such as procurement, shared purchasing power, and collaboration. University support staff are already reporting huge challenges with workload and further staffing cuts will not solve the long-term funding crisis. The five priorities for higher education reform set out by the Education Secretary Bridget Phillipson are admirable ambitions, but with so many universities already in financial difficulty they will be difficult to achieve.

Universities are catalysts for growth at all levels

- There is cross party consensus on the need for increased levels of economic growth. Research by London Economics found that for every £1 of public money invested into UK universities, £14 of economic benefit is generated. The latest figures show the UK higher education sector's teaching, research and innovation activities had an economic impact of £158 billion. When combined with previous London Economics analysis of the direct spending by the sector and the economic benefit of international students, the total impact across UK HE in 2021/22 was

£265 billion. On average, each UK graduate who does their first full-time degree generates an extra £75,000 for the exchequer, including public funding to support teaching, compared to someone who could have gone to university but chose not to.



In addition to the large impact within the government, health, and education sector itself (£52.8bn of economic output), the activities of UK HE providers are estimated to generate particularly large impacts within the distribution, transport, hotels, and restaurants sector (£15.4bn), the production sector (£12.6bn), the real estate sector (£9.7bn), and the professional and support activities sector (£9.2bn). Universities play a unique role in growth, as they support growth in local communities, regional growth as hubs for research, and UK wide growth through innovation and international partnerships.

Universities are central to the government’s missions (Labour MPs only)

Keir Starmer has committed the government to achieve five specific missions across this parliamentary term. Labour MPs will be particularly interested to hear how universities can contribute to these missions.

Mission: fastest growth in the G7

- Universities play a key role in creating a highly qualified workforce and encouraging innovation in order to accelerate economic growth. In addition to conducting cutting-edge research that results in new technologies and products that boost

productivity, they generate graduates with the skills required for modern industry.

Mission: make Britain a clean energy superpower

- Universities play a crucial role in green technology development and in transforming Britain into a renewable energy superpower. They spearhead research on sustainability, energy storage, and renewable energy, which lowers energy prices and carbon emissions. Through programmes that give students the knowledge and skills they need to work in clean energy businesses, higher education institutions also play a significant role in creating a trained workforce for the green sector. Government strategy on how to speed up the shift to net zero is also influenced by university research.

Mission: take back our streets

- Universities offer vital study into criminal justice policies and the causes of crime, which is essential for combating crime and enhancing safety. Their efforts contribute to the development of successful crime prevention plans and rehabilitation initiatives. To ensure that the criminal justice system is prepared to handle contemporary issues, universities also provide training for social workers and law enforcement personnel. By creating programs for the rehabilitation and reintegration of ex-offenders, they help lower crime rates. Studies show that higher education is linked to lower crime rates. Research by the OECD suggests that individuals with higher educational attainment are less likely to engage in criminal behaviour. In the UK, a British Journal of Criminology study found that university graduates are significantly less likely to commit crimes compared to those with lower education levels. Additionally, a RAND Corporation report found that prisoners who participate in education programs, including university-level courses, are 43% less likely to reoffend.

Mission: break down barriers to opportunity

- Higher education is a powerful tool for social mobility and hence breaking down barriers to opportunity. Universities provide access to education for students from all backgrounds through scholarships, outreach programs, and flexible learning options. They also research and address systemic barriers that hinder progress for disadvantaged groups. By offering vocational training and adult education, universities help individuals gain new skills and transition into better career opportunities, promoting a fairer society.

Mission: build an NHS fit for the future

- Universities play a crucial role in preparing the next generation of medical professionals, including doctors, nurses, and technicians, in order to create an NHS that is ready for the future. Additionally, they take the lead in medical research, creating therapies and technological advancements that enhance patient care. By providing healthcare professionals with chances for ongoing education and career development, universities help the NHS adapt to new problems. Furthermore, university-led advancements in medical technology and digital health contribute to the modernisation and efficiency of the NHS.

At the end of the meeting, ask your MP if they would be willing to take specific actions. These could include writing to Ministers, asking parliamentary questions, securing a Westminster Hall debate, attending a UNISON branch meeting, or supporting relevant parliamentary motions.

Make sure you take some photos to use on social media and branch communications, to further promote your campaign.

Follow up actions

After meeting with your MP, send a thank-you note acknowledging their time and reiterating the key points discussed. If your MP agreed to take any actions, politely request copies of any letters, responses, or parliamentary questions they submit on the issue. Maintain regular contact to build rapport and keep them updated on developments in the campaign for improved higher education funding.

Reporting back

Make sure you inform your Regional Head of Higher Education and the Higher Education Service Group Executive that the meeting has taken place, via education@unison.co.uk – include a brief recap of the meeting and any agreed actions.