

## Westminster Higher Education Forum policy conference:

### Next steps for UK universities and their local economies

Timing: Morning, Morning, Friday, 8<sup>th</sup> 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  
**Professor Kathryn Mitchell**, Vice-Chancellor and Chief Executive, University of Derby  
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**  
**Tim Robinson**, Chief Operating Officer, Tech East
- 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  
**Chris Sood-Nicholls**, Managing Director, Regional Development, Sustainable Finance, Lloyds  
**Dr Olga Kozlova**, Director, Innovation and Engagement, University of Oxford
- 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