INDEPENDENT
HIGHER
EDUCATION

IHE Annual Conference 2026

Wednesday 18 November | RCP London

TIME	CONFERENCE PROGRAMME
09.00-10.00	**Registration, refreshments and exhibition**
10.00-10.10	**Welcome** *Sharona Friedman, Chair of the IHE Board, and President and Chief Executive Officer of the Global Institute of Sport* *Reza Mosavian, Senior Account Manager, TechnologyOne - Conference Partner*
10.10-10.25	**Chief Executive's address** *Alex Proudfoot, Chief Executive, IHE*
10.25-10.55	**Ministerial speech** *Rt Hon Baroness Jacqui Smith, Minister for Skills*
10.55-11.25	**Plenary: Office for Students** **Chair:** *Alex Proudfoot, Chief Executive, Independent Higher Education* **Speakers:** *Ruth Hannant and Polly Payne, Chief Executives, Office for Students*
11.25-11.55	**Refreshments, networking and exhibition**
11.55-12.25	**Oceans between us: Higher education in a parted world** Amid growing global tensions, politics is having greater sway over higher education policy. Around the world, higher education providers group together to gain more strategic influence but face increasingly challenging environments in both their home countries

and abroad. Our panel will discuss how geopolitics is impacting their home nations, and how higher education can maintain its vital position in an ever more fragmented world.

Chair: *Phil Deans, Vice Chair of the IHE Board, and President and Vice Chancellor, Richmond American University London*

Speakers: *Peter Hendy, Chief Executive Officer, Independent Higher Education Australia; Barbara Mistick, President, National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities (NAICU)*

12.25-13.15 **Putting a premium on opportunity: Fees, fairness and the new graduate future**

Students are paying more for their education than ever, while government and employer investment is falling and the financial return on a degree is shrinking. Is that a fair deal? And, if not, who should pick up the bill? This plenary panel tackles the question head-on, exploring bold alternatives to the current model. From lower-cost degrees and employer co-funding to wider access to apprenticeships and using the Lifelong Learning Entitlement (LLE) as a route into study, the panel will consider how we might rethink who pays, and how. It will also examine the risks of relying on government funding and the financial realities facing students today.

Chair: *Lewis Wilson, Vice President Higher Education, NUS England*

Speakers: *Professor Kathryn Mitchell CBE, Vice-Chancellor and Chief Executive, University of Derby; Professor Lynette Ryals OBE, Vice-Chancellor, University of Buckingham; Imran Tahir, Senior Economist, Institute for Fiscal Studies*

13.15-14.15 **Lunch, networking and exhibition**

14.15-15.05 **Breakout session 1** *(select one to attend)*

1A – What does Westminster think of us? Politics and independent higher education providers

Political and public support for higher education can no longer be taken for granted. Independent providers occupy a unique position, sitting between traditional higher education and pure skills provision. That middle ground brings particular challenges, but it also creates opportunities that larger institutions often cannot reach. This session examines how UK politics is shaping the environment for independent higher education providers, which arguments are resonating with government, which are failing to gain traction, and

where the opportunities lie over the next few years. It will also provide an insight into the development of IHE's public affairs work, the priorities emerging from it, and how members can help inform and strengthen our collective voice. Gain a clearer understanding of the political landscape and practical ideas for making the case for independent higher education, both locally and nationally.

Chair: *James Coe, Senior Partner and Head of Higher Education, Counterculture Partnership LLP*

Speakers: *Diana Beech, Director, Finsbury Institute; Michelle Di Leo, Director, MDL Strategy; James Newby, President and Chief Executive, NMITE; Tom Williams, News Editor, Times Higher Education*

1B – Financial sustainability: Navigating risk and strategic choices

Independent higher education providers face mounting financial pressures in a rapidly shifting policy and regulatory environment. This session examines the sector's biggest financial risks, from funding and fee pressures to changing demand, rising costs and regulatory exposure. The panel will explore how these risks are being interpreted by providers, regulators and others monitoring the market, and where perspectives may differ. Gain insights into the key indicators of financial risk, how different assessments of risk can shape institutional decision-making, and the questions leaders should be asking about financial resilience, sustainability and future strategy. The panel will also consider the practical choices facing providers, including when to act, adapt, or where necessary, exit.

Chair: *Rory Curley, IHE Board Member, and Chief Executive Officer, Central Film School*

Speakers: *Lil Bremermann-Richard, Group Chief Executive Officer, Oxford International; Will Dent, Head of Financial Analysis, Office for Students; Chris Petts, Advisory Partner, Grant Thornton UK LLP; Joanne Roxburgh, Director, OMNES Education*

1C – Flexibility by design: Building a system for lifelong learning

Flexible learning is widely recognised as essential to widening participation, supporting lifelong learning and meeting the needs of an increasingly diverse student population. Yet many aspects of the current higher education and student finance system continue to make flexible study difficult to deliver and access. This session will explore some of the key barriers to greater flexibility, from funding and maintenance support to course design and learner eligibility. The panel will consider how current arrangements can create unintended

	obstacles for students taking different routes through higher education, whether through modular, accelerated, online or other non-traditional patterns of study. With the Lifelong Learning Entitlement (LLE) providing a timely lens, the discussion will consider what these challenges tell us about the wider system and what needs to change to enable greater flexibility in higher education. **Speakers:** *Professor Wendy Finlay, Pro Vice Chancellor - Education and Students, University of the Built Environment; Michelle Smyth, Head of Government & External Affairs, The Open University* **1D – Fair recruitment and admissions: Balancing access and responsibility** Widening participation is central to the mission of many independent higher education providers, opening up opportunities for students who may be less well served by more traditional routes into higher education. For many providers, growing student numbers is also important to their long-term sustainability. Against this backdrop, there is an important debate about "fairness" in higher education recruitment and admissions, and where institutional responsibility should lie. This session considers how providers can balance ambitions to increase recruitment and widen access with the need to ensure that processes and practices support informed choice and positive student outcomes. Hear about the expectations being set by government and the regulator, and how they intend to strengthen and safeguard recruitment and admissions practices. The panel will consider the practical steps the sector can take in response, and what these new responsibilities mean for institutions. **Chair:** *Marion Lowe, IHE Board Member, and Chief Executive Officer, SP Jain London School of Management* **Speakers:** *Naomi Abayasekara, Policy Officer, Universities UK; Zoe Forbes, Deputy Director, Admissions, Participation and Post-16 Student Experience, Department for Education; Rami Labib, Partner, Pinsent Masons; Nick Miller, Chief Commercial Officer, QA Higher Education*
15.05-15.35	**Refreshments, networking and exhibition**
15.35-16.25	**Breakout session 2** *(select one to attend)* **2A – What does TEF really tell us about quality?** The Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) remains one of the sector's most visible measures of educational quality, but what does it genuinely help institutions, students and policymakers understand,

and where does it fall short? This session examines the strengths, limitations and unintended consequences of the TEF model, drawing on perspectives from across the higher education sector. Gain insights into what TEF can tell us about educational quality, how it is being used in practice to support enhancement, and the risks of relying on it for purposes it was never designed to support. The panel will consider what a future TEF could, or should, look like so that stakeholders can meaningfully learn from TEF outcomes and inform institutional approaches to enhancement.

Chair: *Andrew Boggs, IHE Independent Board Member*

Speakers: *Professor Paul Ashwin, Professor of Higher Education and Interim Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Arts, Humanities, Management and Social Sciences, Lancaster University; Christie Beauchamp, Academic Director, pointblank Music School; Dr Ailsa Crum, Independent Consultant; David Kernohan, Deputy Editor, Wonkhe*

2B – Student sponsorship, compliance and good practice: Insights from UKVI

Senior officials from UK Visas and Immigration (UKVI) will provide an update on the latest developments in student sponsorship, with a focus on what they mean in practice for independent higher education providers. Hear about recent changes to the Basic Compliance Assessment (BCA), new quality requirements for education agents involved in international recruitment, and the latest trends and insights across international student markets. The discussion will explore how providers and government can work together to share intelligence, strengthen good practice, and support a positive experience for international students. Gain a clearer understanding of current expectations, hear examples of effective sponsor practice, and put your questions directly to UKVI.

Chair: *Claire O'Leary, IHE Board Member, and Academic Registrar, ACM*

Speakers: *Ronnie McAulay, Business Manager, Work, Study, Family & Ukraine Services, Home Office; Jack Rose, Study Service Manager, Work, Study, Marriage & Citizenship, Home Office*

2C – Higher education for a changing workforce: Rethinking reskilling

How can higher education better support people already in work to reskill and upskill as industries and labour market needs change? While funding and provision remain largely focused on young people

and traditional undergraduate routes, many of the people with the skills and experience needed to drive future growth are already in the workforce. Drawing on IHE's Industry and Skills Project, this session explores where demand for reskilling and retraining lies, what employers are willing to invest in, and what working adults and career changers need from higher education. The panel will consider practical approaches to building stronger partnerships between providers, employers and the local skills system, and explore what needs to change in funding, regulation and skills planning to enable lifelong learning at scale.

Chair: *Rachel Nicholson, IHE Board Member, and Head of Institution, Academy of Live Technology*

Speakers: *Bishan Chapman, Former member of the IHE Student Advisory Board (2025/26) and graduate of the University of the Built Environment; Dr Melanie Collins, Head of Region (South), Skills England; Professor Ian Palmer, Principal, Escape Studios; Nimmi Patel, Associate Director – Skills & Talent Policy, techUK*

2D – Supporting disabled students: Are providers ready for what's next?

Disability support is an increasingly important strategic priority for higher education providers, with more students identifying as disabled each year and continued evidence of gaps in experience and outcomes. Greater regulatory expectations, alongside growing calls for a 'whole provider approach', are placing renewed emphasis on how institutions respond. This session explores what this means in practice. Gain insights into what is expected of institutions and hear practical approaches to meeting these expectations across leadership and governance, policy and process, and the development and delivery of effective models of support. The panel will consider the structural and cultural change needed to build institution-wide ownership of inclusion and embed disability support across the student experience.

Chair: *Musa Raja, IHE Independent Student Board Member*

Speakers: *Rebecca Bouckley, Student Support and Engagement Manager, Tavistock Education and Training; Suzanne Carrie, Head of Equality and Welfare, Office for Students; James Coe, Senior Partner and Director, Counterculture Partnership LLP; Dr Peter Kay, Associate Dean of Academic Engagement and Partnerships, ASU London*

16.30-17.10 **The student voice: Perceptions of higher education in an age of choice**

Are students starting to think differently about the value of higher education? What does this mean for the sector? This panel brings together students and graduates to share their perspectives on how they make decisions about higher education, what they value, and what they expect from the experience. The discussion will explore how students navigate choices between traditional degrees, apprenticeships, vocational routes and more flexible or modular learning, as well as how they decide whether and when higher education is right for them. Hear how these conversations happen between students themselves, beyond prospectuses and league tables, and what they reveal about changing expectations. The panel will reflect on what these changing expectations mean for providers and offer practical ways to assess whether course design, delivery and communications align with what prospective students value.

Chair: *Sharona Friedman, Chair of the IHE Board, and President and Chief Executive Officer of the Global Institute of Sport*

Speakers: *George Hastings, Co-Host, Get There One Day Podcast; Aaliyah Likuluta, Founder, LiyahTalks, Speaker and Youth Voice Advocate; Sophie Scott, Vice Apprentice Chair, South East Apprenticeship Ambassador Network; Alice Stapleton, Career Change Coach & Coach Supervisor; Charlie Wasley, Co-Host, Get There One Day Podcast*

17.10-17.30 **Closing remarks**

Sharona Friedman, Chair of the IHE Board, and President and Chief Executive Officer of the Global Institute of Sport

17.30-20.00 **Drinks reception | IHE Awards 2026**