

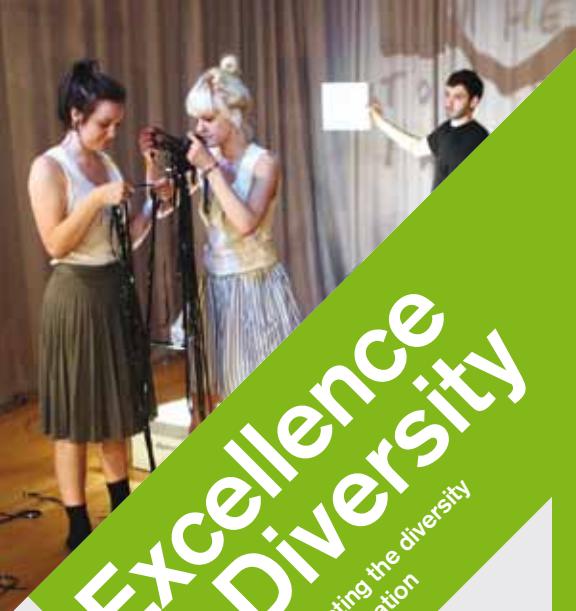
Excellence in Diversity

A report celebrating the diversity
of UK higher education



GuildHE

Executive Summary



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Foreword

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There is no one in the UK whose life isn't touched every day by the teaching, learning and research that happens in universities and colleges across the UK. The achievements of the UK's higher education sector are justly admired around the globe for their excellence. The fact that the diversity of the sector is key to that excellence is less well rehearsed. This report aims to correct that and celebrate the diversity of the UK's higher education sector.

Higher education in the UK in the 21st century consists of a variety of institutions with a variety of strengths, but sharing a single fundamental purpose: to deliver high-quality, world-leading higher education. That diversity brings greater opportunities for innovation, to spread new good practice, to be more creative.

Diversity encourages healthy competition, drives efforts to reach new learners and inspires fresh approaches to research. It means improving choice for students and graduate employers, and encourages different ways of engaging with businesses and industries and new ways of enriching the social and economic prosperity and cultural life of the UK's communities and regions.



Regionally focused, smaller or specialist institutions have expertise in particular disciplines, areas of research and teaching or in specialised areas of economic or cultural activity, which can make them shining beacons of excellence amongst our colleges and universities. Some, not all, of these institutions are smaller in size and demonstrate an agility and adaptability to change, together with a student experience to inspire the wider sector.

The UK is facing many long-term, difficult challenges. They include the need to improve economic productivity; to enhance, broaden and deliver a highly skilled workforce; and to ensure public money is spent effectively and efficiently.

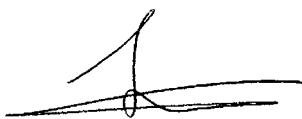
This report sets out the contribution smaller universities as well as regionally focused and specialist institutions make to a diverse higher education sector that is fit to help address those challenges. It also makes the case for ensuring that diversity is not put at risk, but is protected and promoted.

Higher education ministers and other senior figures have endorsed the value of small and specialist universities. In March 2015, announcing the next year's allocation to English universities and

colleges, the Chief Executive of HEFCE, Professor Madeleine Atkins, referred to "small and specialist institutions", acknowledging "their economic and cultural importance to the country".

High-level recognition of the value of small and specialist institutions demonstrates a growing appreciation that in the 21st century, a thriving, globally successful higher education system is strong partly because it is diverse.

This report is a timely contribution to inform government policy and spending commitments over the next parliament. This executive summary highlights the key conclusions and issues showcased in our report *Excellence in Diversity*, which is grounded in real examples of excellent practice, demonstrating how the diversity of the higher education sector contributes to the educational, economic and social well-being of the UK.



Executive Summary

Today's modern higher education system has achieved a rich diversity – unprecedented in the history of UK universities. The UK is justly proud of its world-leading higher education system. As in other areas of life, diversity is key to that success: our higher education sector is so strong partly because it is so diverse.

This report serves both as a celebration and a caution. It sets out how diversity in higher education also means a diversity of highly valued contributions to economic, social and cultural life in the UK.

It demonstrates how regionally focused, specialist and smaller institutions, in particular, are well placed to help the UK tackle some of the key economic and social challenges facing the nation over the next decades.

But as well, it highlights the need for policymakers to protect and preserve the diversity of our sector, and to recognise the needs of different types of institution in order to maximise the significant benefits to be gained.

The strengths of diversity

UK higher education, in the 21st century, occurs in many different shapes and sizes. The diversity of UK higher education nurtures innovation and creativity. It means more choice for students and for graduate employers, and more opportunities to reach out to new learners. It encourages healthy competition, fresh approaches to research, different ways of engaging with business and industries and new ways of enriching the social, economic and cultural prosperity of life in the UK's communities and regions.





Extending opportunity and unlocking talent for national prosperity

An important challenge for the UK over the coming decade is to improve economic productivity. A key element in that is to develop a highly skilled workforce in which more people, wherever they are in their careers, have had the opportunity to acquire and apply the necessary skills.

A thriving diversity in UK higher education, which includes institutions with a deeply founded ethos of widening opportunities, nurturing individual aspirations and unlocking talent, is not only desirable in a modern, fair society; it is also essential to achieving the economic productivity and prosperity we need.

Strong links and expertise in their regional and international industries and professions, combined with a profound determination to widen the reach of higher education, mean that many specialist, regionally focused and smaller higher education institutions excel in recruiting and nurturing a broad range of talent. Their students come, through a variety of routes, from a wide range of academic and social backgrounds, including those who leave school or college with high previous attainment, those entering higher education later in life or those re-entering while pursuing a career to enhance their skills.

Many of these institutions offer technical and professional qualifications and apprenticeships, which are shaped with employers in areas of high economic demand.





Understanding employers and graduate careers

Graduates of specialist, regionally focused and smaller universities have an outstanding record for being able to launch their careers.

HESA figures for 2012/13 show that small and/or specialist institutions make up half of the top 30 UK institutions for graduate employment.

This is a reflection of successful working partnerships with specific professions, businesses and industry sectors, and the ability of these institutions to understand and adapt successfully to often significant changes in industry practice and patterns of employment, and deliver highly skilled graduates ready for the work place. These institutions frequently engage employers themselves in the design of courses, to ensure provision remains on top of current industry trends.



One of the key features often cited by employers is that graduates from these institutions are job-ready, in part because lecturers are often current practitioners and industry experts with many years of experience within their sectors.



Research

Research excellence is not the preserve of any one part of the sector, and world-leading and outstanding research is found and recognised throughout higher education.

Specialist institutions, and regionally focused and smaller universities produce academic research of world-leading and excellent quality, according to official judgements of quality.

In the 2008 Research Assessment Exercise and the 2014 Research Excellence Framework, research carried out in smaller universities, and regionally focused and specialist institutions was judged as world leading or excellent in areas including agricultural sciences, creative, performing and visual arts, education, humanities, health and ageing, sport, technology, and theology.

This was achieved without the more generous research funding afforded to other parts of higher education.

Specialist, regionally focused and smaller universities have a particularly proud record of generating research that has high economic, industrial and social impact. In important areas, including food security, the creative industries and health, the hallmarks of this research include stimulating enterprise and innovation; contributing to regional and national growth; and developing smart, creative and sustainable businesses.

One of the key characteristics of institutions in this part of the sector is that the roles of researcher/teacher and, frequently, professional practitioner are inextricably linked. This is not just an efficiency driven by necessity – these institutions, unlike others, do not have the resources to separate research from teaching by employing staff on research-only contracts – it is an inspirational model that ensures research, teaching and learning combine to draw on expertise outside higher education as well.

These close links to local, regional, national and international industries, reliant on a highly skilled workforce, mean that the research activities of specialist and smaller universities feed naturally into their teaching and learning strategies. This ensures that curricula are up to date, fitting the needs of both higher education and industry; a real win-win.

Internationally popular

The variety and choice offered by the diversity in our system are critical factors in the UK's general popularity as a destination for international students. Many UK specialist, regionally focused and smaller institutions are also global organisations engaged in significant partnerships, world-leading research and other international activities. They successfully attract large numbers of talented overseas students each year.

In general, international alumni from UK institutions are overwhelmingly positive about their university experience. They appreciate the distinctive ways of teaching and learning; the safe and welcoming environments; the tradition and culture of tolerance; and the lifelong career opportunities that follow. Many of these qualities are particular characteristics of specialist, regionally focused and smaller institutions where a shared focus on a particular area of expertise or a smaller campus can cultivate a positive sense of community.



The student experience

The student experience matters. Higher education is a globalised industry and 21st century students, including those based in the UK, have a global choice as to where to learn. The number of UK-based students who choose to study in Europe, North America and on other continents is growing each year.

Student expectations have been rising in recent years, not least because of the increased financial contribution that students in England are making, although the impact has been felt across the UK. Smaller, regionally focused and specialist institutions are particularly well placed to offer excellent student experiences.

Smaller institutions featured in the top 10 'Most welcoming' in The Higher Expectations Survey 2014 conducted





by YouthSight. Because of their human scale, these institutions easily cultivate a real sense of belonging, community and a more personal experience.

Specialist institutions, whatever their size, also successfully nurture a strong community by sharing expertise and interest in the research, learning and teaching of a particular discipline, for example, design, agriculture, drama, music or teacher education.

The sense of community in smaller, regionally focused and specialist institutions contributes significantly to high levels of student satisfaction and low levels of student drop-out. The latest data from HESA shows a mix of institutions in the top 20 for lowest levels of non-continuation – nine of those are small and/or specialist institutions.

Building quality

The expectations of students for high-quality environments, and the aspirations of institutions to provide them, have meant that many universities across the UK are engaging in expensive infrastructure developments.

When money is tight, the provision of high-quality facilities places particular pressure on the smaller universities and more specialist institutions, which frequently have additional building and equipment costs associated with their specialisms and the need to stay industry-relevant.



Conclusions and Recommendations

- 1** The diversity and dynamism amongst our universities and colleges are key to the outstanding strength, reputation and international competitiveness of the entire UK higher education system.
- 2** A strategy of making higher education policy that avoids 'one size fits all', but takes account of and reflects the diversity of the sector, will maximise the benefits of our higher education system to the UK economy and society.
- 3** With a proven track-record in widening participation, and graduate employability, and successful close working links with specific industries and professions, specialist universities, and regionally focused and smaller institutions are well placed to address important challenges facing 21st century Britain, including improvements to national economic productivity and enhancing and enlarging a highly skilled workforce.
- 4** Smaller, regionally focused and specialist universities can face particular costs associated with their size or specialist disciplines, or both. They can only rise to national economic and social challenges if these costs are well understood and recognised in policy and funding decisions. Previous public ministerial acknowledgements of the importance of protecting 'small and specialist institutions' have been welcome.
- 5** Funding streams, designed to match the range of outstanding strengths in different HE institutions, maximise the gains to the UK of a diverse higher education sector – as examples: recognising the extra costs of widening participation of mature or part-time students and those from non-traditional backgrounds; the additional expense of small-group teaching and the cost of delivering specialist courses or those with expensive infrastructure and equipment.

6 As a rule, funding allocations should be based on the excellence of the bid and the potential impact of the funding rather than limiting access through arbitrary thresholds, as in the Research Partnership Investment Fund and Higher Education Innovation Funding in recent years.

7 World-leading and excellent research takes place in a wide range of UK universities, and it is important that outstanding research continues to be funded wherever it is found. The dual support system of funding UK research is essential to support the full diversity of UK higher education institutions, some of which are locked out of funding from research councils due to scale or the resource implications of multiple bidding rounds.

8 All institutions are seeking and developing different ways to engage with their students as customers, partners and co-producers. Smaller, regionally focused and specialist institutions score highly in satisfaction surveys for welcoming students and are popular amongst international students. The opportunities offered to students by the diversity across the sector are highly valued; and sustaining and supporting that diversity will protect and enhance student choice.

9 The higher education sector must be regulated in a way that protects the student interest and promotes high-quality education at its core. New providers should be able to enter the market if they demonstrate high-quality provision and institutions with a strong track-record for good student outcomes should be freed up to continue to do this.



About GuildHE

- GuildHE is one of two formal representative bodies for UK higher education.
- It is consulted on all major reforms in higher education.
- GuildHE meets regularly with government ministers, civil servants, funding councils and other stakeholders to discuss policy, and current issues and to exchange information.
- It is a company member of a wide range of higher education sector agencies and is represented on their boards.
- Its 37 member institutions include:
 - multi-faculty universities, offering a wide range of subject disciplines
 - leading providers in professional subject areas including art and design, music and the performing arts; agriculture; education; health; and sports
 - several GuildHE institutions have their roots in Victorian philanthropy and an interest in education and crafts, including specialist institutions and those with church foundations
 - high-quality private institutions from both not-for-profit and for-profit sectors
 - further education colleges delivering higher education.
- GuildHE is highly committed to social mobility, inclusion and the promotion of diversity.
- GuildHE places a strong emphasis on student partnership.

The full report, Excellence in Diversity, is available to download at www.guildhe.ac.uk

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