LONDON HIGHER

Strategic Plan 2023-26

Foreword

The last few years have seen significant change. Whether one considers the policy landscape with the wealth of legislative changes being introduced, political changes with corresponding Ministerial priorities seen through the introduction of T-levels and degree apprenticeships and a focus on skills, or financial pressures including cost of living challenges, it is clear things have shifted in the educational landscape. In our own London Higher area, the last two years have seen a change in the leadership through a new CEO, with a corresponding emphasis on member engagement and the need to ensure London Higher's voice is responding to the many emerging issues and helping to shape the local debate.

This will continue to be important, as the next three years are likely to see continued change impacting the sector. Ahead of us are national and London Mayoral elections. There will be implementation of legislative changes, scrutiny of the regulatory framework around higher education, and considerations around supporting students both in terms of wellbeing and into employment. There are also unknowns, for example in the form of technological changes.

It is therefore critically important that London Higher has a clear view of itself as an organisation and where it wants to be at the end of the three-year period ahead. This strategy sets out what our priorities will be and how we have arrived at them.

In short, we need to consolidate and build on core relationships, focus on priorities, engage at the regional and national level, and create the right infrastructure within the team to do this. This needs to be supported by financial growth, including through external sponsorship.

The plan is structured as follows:

- Section 1: Current Set-Up
- Section 2: Vision
- Section 3: Prioritisation and Changes
- Section 4: Background to the Prioritisation
- Section 5: Outcomes

SECTION 1: London Higher's current set-up

London Higher is a membership organisation which has existed for over 20 years, but which has seen a significant shift in how it operates and its focus over the last few years, with a greater focus now on tackling priority areas for the capital's higher education sector.

It is London-based and London-focused, supporting and campaigning on higher educational issues, and bringing a strong regional understanding to discussion and debate.

The organisation has three divisions:

- London Higher (core) which makes the case for London's higher education and research through a suite of networks, special projects and briefings, and encouraging collaboration across the sector.

- AccessHE (and Uni Connect), which supports widening participation and runs a number of forums to support members on issues and understanding in a range of topics from racial equity to mature students. It also works with London schools to support young people from disadvantaged backgrounds to enter higher education and is part of the London National Collaborative Outreach Programme (Uni Connect).

- London Nursing, Healthcare and Medicine, which consists of two groups that bring together London's schools of nursing, midwifery and allied healthcare, medicine and dentistry to meet, discuss and collaborate.

London Higher (core) is the largest division and the business plan focuses on priorities for this division over the next three years.

SECTION 2: Vision

What is the backdrop against which this plan is made?

While it is always hard to predict the future, the last few years have seen exceptional change, including Brexit, changes in UK Government Ministers and corresponding priorities, and significant financial pressures. London has also faced changes from the 'levelling up' agenda and associated funding priorities post-Covid.

We face both a General Election and London Mayor elections in the next two years, which will bring new pledges and further changes.

There are legislative changes on the horizon, including in relation to the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act 2023 and the Lifelong Loan Entitlement (LLE). There are T-levels, degree apprenticeships and developments in course delivery which are changing the educational landscape, and new technologies which are starting to emerge such as generative AI.

There is also an inquiry around England's higher educator regulator, the Office for Students (OfS), which may provide further changes to the sector.

London Higher's business plan has therefore been developed to:

- ensure we have a clear, shared idea of core priorities and structures;
- improve our financial position to ensure we have funding to undertake the projects and engagement we need to; with the tools and skills we need to do so; and
- allow some flexibility to enable us to respond to new or changing issues and priorities.

We will be a leading voice in championing Higher Education, specifically highlighting the London dimension. Forming alliances and engaging with regional and national partners will be especially important in helping us succeed in our ambitions.

Vision

Our starting point needs to be our vision, to ensure a shared commitment to the destination to which we are working:

[We] support our members by advocating for and on behalf of London HE. It is our aim to become a well-respected "go to" representative body for higher education in London to ensure the success of all our members.

Our core mission is therefore to help enable members, their staff and their students to thrive:

We help our members to address the opportunities and challenges that arise from our shared location in London. We assist and support our members to achieve their goals, whilst being a collective voice. We influence and work with a wide range of stakeholders and networks as a trusted, non-partisan and professional partner.

Our primary functions remain centred around the 'three Cs' of convening, communicating and campaigning:

At London Higher, we support our members by advocating for and on behalf of London's higher education sector. We act as a convenor, hosting collaborative networks to identify new initiatives to solve common challenges; as a communicator, being a collective voice for our members and promoting London as a world-class study and research destination; and as a campaigner, responding to policy concerns and raising awareness of policy implications across our diverse membership.

Does this vision still hold true?

As an SMT we came together to challenge ourselves on this – both on whether we agreed with this as our vision and whether we are working to deliver on this. The following points emerged:

1. We are a truly LONDON membership organisation. While there will be national issues on which we can and should engage, this must always be to ensure the London lens is applied. As a London organisation, we also need to ensure we are engaging with other institutions in the capital which operate at the London level. The view was that we need to increase our engagement and collaboration with those who share our London lens, which include the GLA, Mayor of London, BusinessLDN, London Chamber of Commerce and Industry, London Colleges, NHS Confederation and the London trusts.

2. We need to ensure we are engaging in the right way with key national organisations to ensure we work with them, and through them, but do not stretch ourselves too thinly and therefore dilute our impact or the need to represent London interests. On occasions we will engage at national level more directly when the issue is a London specific one (such as London weighting) or when we believe it is particularly important to ensure the London specific issues are heard directly from us (such as on international students). This will include having discussions/meetings with protagonists in the political and regulatory field. We will seek to maximise our engagement with key departments and political influencers. Other times we will work through and with other organisations, such as Universities UK, on issues of UK or England-wide relevance, including regulatory or funding issues.

3. We support HIGHER EDUCATION and the process which enables people to enter higher education, participate and succeed. Our voice is to champion higher education and ensure our members' interests are understood and represented, including by adding regional understanding to national discussions and lobbying for the capital's success. Engagement with Government and policy officials is seen as critical, as we have successfully brought that regional understanding directly to policy officials in several departments, including the Department for Education (DfE) and Department for Science, Innovation and Technology (DSIT) and Treasury. We want to strengthen, increase, and deepen this.

4. We recognise that the world of higher education is changing because of new ways of thinking about education (e.g. LLE) and technological changes. London Higher will therefore need to support and work with members to get the right input to help them respond and operationalise their activities.

5. We acknowledge that the student journey is increasingly important. Our work with schools is part of that picture, as is the need to support widening participation and social mobility agendas. The student journey also includes experiences when studying, bringing in student accommodation, mental health and wellbeing, and support from education into the workforce.

We need to be clear on, and support, priorities, and create the right space for shared ideas and collaboration for our members.

SECTION 3: Prioritisation and changes

Focus

London Higher has grown in membership and stature. Over the last couple of years, and under a new Chief Executive Officer, London Higher has grown into a prominent representative voice for the sector.

There is significant member engagement and an increase in policy connections. Key agendas, such as lobbying for the London weighting, have benefitted from substantial London Higher focus. We are known to key officials in several Government departments.

We want to retain this.

The focus now needs to be on consolidating what we have – a very firm, reputable organisation serving its members as a voice for the capital – and building the team with a clear sense of priority areas which we have drawn from our members.

It is important that we have a shared view on what our priorities are, because there are likely to be many calls on our time (reflecting the changing political scene, the wide variety of member interests, and new and emerging issues). We need to be clear about both what we can and should do, and accept that there will be things which will have to be deprioritised or cannot be delivered in the same way.

Financial

We will look to provide a firmer financial footing for the organisation including through sponsorship and funding bids. This will enable us to invest in the team and infrastructure, as well as providing us with funding for core projects.

Operational and team

Through a clear sense of identity and priority, we will bring a shared sense of culture and purpose to the London Higher team. We want our values to be known and shared within the team and developed further. We believe people are important – both those we engage with and the people in London Higher itself. We believe trust, integrity and open communications are key to a successful organisation.

We want our values and vision to be shared by the whole of London Higher, and will be seeking in the next three years to bring the company's divisions closer together. This will require transitional arrangements to be managed carefully, which will need to consider how much integration is desirable and achievable and how risks will be managed in this area. We are striving for a greater sense of shared successes, closer working across divisions, a better understanding of issues across the whole organisation and improved information sharing.

Prioritisation itself

The guiding principles we will use to determine the work we need to progress are that London's higher education institutions (HEIs) are:

1. A local asset
2. A global magnet
3. An engine for innovation and enterprise
4. A source of skills and jobs

These are inter-connected priorities, but we believe they reflect the three areas in which London higher education institutions work, namely: local (1), international (2) and national (3 & 4).

The London Higher team will deliver using these four areas as a means of assessing our work priorities. We will continue to convene, collaborate, communicate and campaign. We will specifically seek to achieve the following objectives under each priority area:

A local asset

1. Maintain and enhance the social mobility successes of London's HEIs.
2. Promote and facilitate the civic contributions of London's HEIs.

A global magnet

1. Strengthen and promote 'brand London' to increase the region's global appeal to potential students, staff, researchers and investors.
2. Build an attractive, diverse, inclusive and welcoming community in which to live, study, research and work.

An engine for innovation and enterprise

1. Champion London's R&D successes, support innovation and promote the sector's partnership potential with business, local authorities and the third sector, asking what they want from higher education and what will help our members deliver better outcomes.
2. Promote and facilitate positive outcomes for both London's graduates and London plc., including via employability and knowledge exchange.

A source of skills and jobs

1. Strengthen understanding of the potential of the London HE sector to promote growth and opportunities, particularly through partnership with schools, colleges and employers.
2. Promote London's specialist knowledge and skills, including in the health and creative sectors, and raise the profiles and issues particular to these sectors.

In all the above pillars, it is imperative that we a) raise awareness of the heightened pressures facing London HEIs, students and staff, including cost pressures, and campaign for policies that take account of London's unique circumstances; b) promote and facilitate initiatives that help students, staff, institutions and their local communities; and c) engage with policy and regulation fundamental to the good health of the sector.

We also need to underpin these pillars with financial considerations and ensure we do not lose sight of some key priorities (e.g., the need to service smaller memberships like our health groups or deliver on projects like our creative academies work). Our funding is drawn from various membership and bid money. To improve our financial resilience, we will be looking at how to bring in sponsors and generate new bid money.

We will also consider what has impact, both for the organisation and our members. Our plans will recognise what we have heard from members, for example that they wish to have roundtables and similar events and appreciate collaboration and discussion on key issues through our networking and forum activities, so we will continue with these. How we generate impact from them, however, will rely on recognising the importance of our communications, marketing and branding, together with the need for data and an understanding of impact to underpin our priorities.

In terms of allocating staff time to each of these priorities, it is important to recognise at the outset that the business of engaging and influencing will always require the London Higher team to be nimble and reactive as well as proactive, particularly in times of intense political change.

There are also different additional requirements for senior and middle managers, in terms of oversight, leadership, relationship management and risk management. We are considering how to transition, and how to pilot some changes, being alive to the need to minimise disruption, the challenges of any transition and the need to ensure our new model works.

Given the small size of London Higher, it will be critical to ensure good communications and flexibility at senior level, coupled with effective decision making and an appreciation that prioritisation by its very nature means some things (be they large commitments like projects or small commitments like speaking opportunities) will be delivered on, others paused, and others not taken forward or declined. As an SMT, we will need to ensure we are comfortable making these decisions and support each other through the process.

We have also proactively undertaken a stakeholder engagement exercise to support these changes. This has led to the recognition that the London Higher leadership team, together with our Head of Policy and Networks and Communications lead need to manage their stakeholder relationships in a more systematic way. Through enhanced stakeholder engagement, at all levels including Head of Institution, we will help members feel listened to. We will be seeking regular feedback, including from new and re-joining members.

SECTION 5: Background to our prioritisation

To develop a clear idea of our priorities:

1. We have engaged our members through a membership survey and through informal feedback from one-to-one sessions and visits, and engagement with the Chair of the Board.
2. We are engaged in understanding the political and policy landscape and have asked ourselves what is important to our members and what is on the horizon which will matter and require us to assist.
3. We have considered opportunities, gaps and potential for collaboration through discussion and listening to information coming to us from a variety of sources from Heads of Institutions to our network participants.
4. We have considered our own set up and structures, including leadership at different levels and, as mentioned above, are giving thought to greater unification and information-sharing across the organisation.
5. We have thought about the importance of our London position, and challenged ourselves on whether there is more we can do around cross-London engagement and understanding the London scene.
6. We have looked at our finances and called out that the current financial arrangements need improving to enable us to buy better equipment for our team, recruit and retain effectively, and provide additional flexibility. Although a review of the membership fees may help, we think that there is also a case for exploring increased partnership working and bids. We would welcome the Board's support in this area.

We will look at each of these issues in turn.

Membership Survey Results

In January 2023 we undertook a membership survey, in which 67% of our membership responded (of which 25% of engagement was from Heads of Institutions or their senior teams). We had a good spread from different institutions.

The results told us the top areas of concern were around:

- financial sustainability;
- student recruitment (domestic and international); and
- student journey concerns (access/participation; equality/inclusion, wellbeing).

We asked about influence and analysis.
London Higher scored well for working effectively to influence policy in higher education issues or London-specific issues and also scored highly in supporting institutions by providing good quality analysis and advice on policy issues.

There was a desire to see more:

- influence with government and the general public;
- invitations to hear speakers on priority topics;
- active engagement with the Mayor of London and the Minister for London to generate support for issues;
- (by some members) specific focus on specialist arts institutions (e.g. funding, Mayoral engagement);
- articulation of London as a study destination;
- networking events; and
- campaign for international students.

Political and Policy Landscape

In addition to the membership survey, we know through engagement and our work in the policy arena that there are other issues which we need to consider, for example legislation, degree apprenticeships, skills/enterprise/employability, and regulatory changes.

It would be hard to do justice to all the changes in this section. So, what we will do here is to mention some of the main areas and why they matter.

The sector is experiencing significant financial challenge. We have seen the continued cap of tuition fees at £9,250 per year, which will remain unchanged until at least 2024/25. At the same time, higher education institutions are experiencing the same inflationary pressures as elsewhere. They are also wanting to support staff and students through cost-of-living challenges. International students have been providing much-needed income, but this is now an uncertain policy area.

Legislative changes are also set to impact students, with undergraduates set to pay loans back over a 40-year period from 2023. From 2025, we will see the Lifelong Loan Entitlement (LLE) bringing a modular approach to education, but the detail and operational elements are yet to be worked through. Other regulatory changes in the pipeline include the impact from the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act which extends to academic freedoms.

There are emerging areas of interest, such as the political desire to increase the number of nurses and doctors which has implications for types of degree, capacity constraints and the impact on the workforce overall.

And there are wider influences, such as the sustainability and Net Zero agenda, in which higher education institutions want and need to play a part to deliver for the students of the future.

Opportunities/Gaps and Collaboration

The imminent national and local elections provide opportunities to engage with politicians across all parties on key London Higher issues. The Chief Executive Officer is already engaged at the national level with both the Conservative and Opposition parties, but we want to deepen these relationships, and we have agreed that the Head of Policy's role will include fostering good relations with identified politicians, alongside the CEO. We will also seek to engage with Mayoral candidates.

We would like to do further work to identify London stakeholders including regional stakeholders across the capital.

We also hear recurring themes in certain key areas. These include: enterprise and the need to work more closely with business; the need to promote the creative industries and counteract negative rhetoric; the need to ensure London is positioned as inviting to students and staff; and that London is recognised as important in its own right, but also for the success of the country as a whole.

Our own set-up and structures and how we will operate

We have reviewed our structures and recognised that the organisation has gone through considerable change. There is an ever-increasing need to understand and operate in a policy context, but we also need to build greater resilience, think about our leadership, remove the likelihood of single points of failure where possible and create a culture where people feel valued and can learn and thrive.

The finance work in the AccessHE division has undergone significant change, with a decrease in areas such as running events with the day-to-day finance tasks and an increase in project work which necessitates lower financial overheads.

Communications and marketing continue to be a priority area, and we need to ensure that there are a number of individuals skilled in taking forward communications and marketing activity.

The CEO will continue to manage a number of direct reports and lead the transition needed for integration and prioritisation, supported by her SMT. Underpinning this will need to be greater consideration of how to improve information-sharing across divisions and consider how to enhance London Higher's communications and branding.

The COO will coordinate the finance, communications and events functions of the organisation to ensure that they can support the delivery of the prioritisation work, led by the CEO and other priority leads.

London positioning

London is complex and diverse. We want to do more to engage with organisations who are both pan-London and sub-regional, and and work with them to gather data on the capital. This will enable us to highlight issues and successes, but also take a 'big picture' approach to some of our work. For example, in the area of enterprise, we would like to think with London-focused business organisations about how best to showcase student talent, as well as promote the other services that our members can provide to London plc, as highlighted in our 2023 business-facing Powering London report.

We also would like to increase our data, knowledge and engagement at a more granular level.

Finance

London Higher's primary means of income is membership fees from the three divisions. This equates to around 70% of our annual income. With around 78% of our budget allocated to cover staffing costs for our 15-person team we will look to expand our income generation to ensure we can allocate more resource to our direct delivery budget.

There is no process in place to increase the fees in line with inflation or need. As part of our business planning, we will look to provide to the Board a proposal on how to introduce a

process to review membership fees on a regular basis, undertaken in a transparent, independent way which considers both the achievements of LH and the fees charged by similar organisations. The Board agreed earlier this year to changes to the membership structure and supported the concept of developing Community of Interest (CoI) groups. Over the next three years, this will also be explored further and developed should the proposal be viable.

However, we recognise that membership fees may not be sufficient to provide us with the income we would like to:

- recruit and retain the best staff;
- invest in our staff, through training and development;
- purchase based on value for money rather than price;
- invest in our technology so staff have the equipment they need to support them in their work;
- have an additional room for discussions and meetings in Woburn House; and
- consider additional projects which we would like to take forward.

We will look to bring in sponsors to help support key events, ad hoc projects and raise finance. We will also look at opportunities to bid for work which aligns with our objectives in a more proactive way. Over the next three years we will explore where we can bid, minimum bid amounts to make it worth our while and learn from what we do.

We considered, but rejected other ideas for increased financing, such as the development of training courses and awards.

Stakeholder mapping and collaboration

The SMT at London Higher undertook a mapping exercise to support policy prioritisation. This looked at levels of influence and interest, and consisted of four categories: manage closely, keep satisfied, monitor and keep informed. The mapping revealed numerous stakeholders and enabled a discussion around who in the team would lead on which key stakeholders.

We have acknowledged elsewhere in the business plan the importance of our members and certain local and political key stakeholders. We also identified the importance of regional and sector communications stakeholders. Our end goal for the three years of this business plan is to ensure we have strong relations, in which members feel heard and valued. Through this we can continue to support our members.

To do this we need to have good relationships with local and national government and significant London organisations and look for opportunities to discuss issues with idea generators, leaders, and influencers. This will enable us to round out our knowledge and understanding of key issues, to share thinking with members and to give members, where possible, an opportunity to hear first-hand from key individuals. The next three years will see increased collaboration with key London partners.

New membership criteria

This year has seen the introduction of new membership criteria. This will require any new members to be assessed against:

1. Strength of higher education provision
2. Location within the Greater London metropolitan area
3. Commitment to quality higher education provision and London-focused civic activity
4. Transparency and independence of governance

The recognition that London's boundaries are wider than the GLA boundaries is welcomed, as it recognises the reality of London's commute, sphere of influence and reach – and aligns with the expanded remit of other initiatives we are involved in, such as the BFI-funded Metro Skills Cluster which serves London and the three gateway counties.

We would anticipate a small number of additional members applying to join London Higher as a result of this change.

SECTION 6: Outcomes

Outcome after three years – how will we know if our current proposals work?

Some of the changes we propose will take time.

In three years', London Higher will be:

- representing London HEIs as the voice for the sector with a continued strong regional voice and presence;
- a strong influencing organisation, seen as a trusted source of information at the national and local level;
- delivering on agreed priorities, not trying to 'do it all' but focused on what matters most, with sufficient capacity to respond to emerging/new issues as they arise;
- home to a team that works together collaboratively, shares information, has a shared sense of values and thrives;
- retaining current membership levels as a minimum, and ideally growing these;
- home to members who feel listened to and connected to London Higher; and
- on a firmer financial footing.

In order to do this, we will prioritise our workload, manage risks, have plans to support specific areas of work, and invest in ourselves as a team. We will have a structure which supports the CEO but empowers direct reports and creates a culture of support and collaboration.
We will grow our income which will result in sponsorship, bid work and other additional sources of funds as appropriate.

All this work will be underpinned by a **Marketing and Communications Plan** which will include looking at the channels we adopt for our activity and how we engage with our core stakeholder groups. This plan will be developed shortly to complement this strategy.

Conclusion

The next few years are likely to see considerable change, given various legislative changes such as those arising from the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act 2023 and also wider political changes, through national and local elections.

We remain committed to our vision to advocate for London on behalf of our members. With so much happening in the Higher Education space it is essential that we ensure we are set up in the right way to deliver on priorities. To this end, we are organising our work into broad groups (outlined in detail above) aligned with the characteristics of the London higher education sector, namely as: a local asset, a global magnet, an engine for innovation and enterprise, and a source of skills and jobs.

In order to do this, we will continue to listen to our members and consider their needs, build our internal team's capabilities, engage in different ways to support the higher education agenda in London from roundtables to collaborations and partnerships, and look to further our advocate base to ensure our messages are maximized.

We are excited at what possibilities the future may hold for London Higher and we look forward to embarking on the next stage of our business journey with the support of our much-valued members.