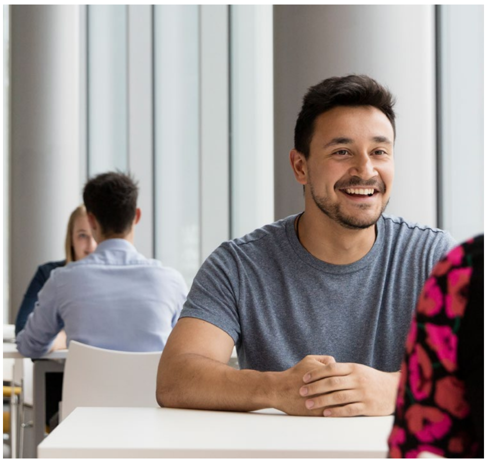
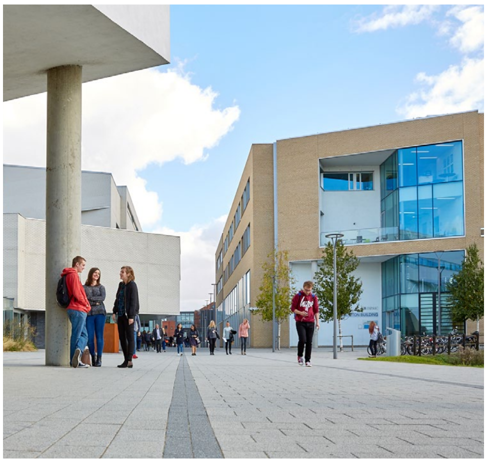
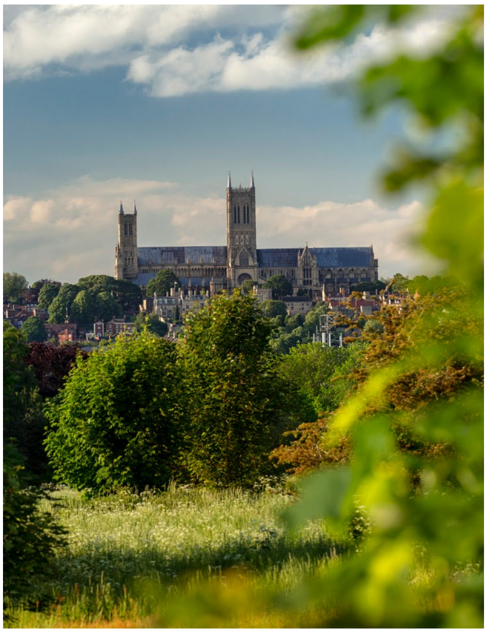
MANIFESTO 2024







How Greater Lincolnshire's MPs can support higher education in our region.

UNIVERSITY OF
LINCOLN

Introduction

The University of Lincoln is a university of and for the 21st Century. Created by the people of Lincolnshire, we are as much the University for Lincoln, as the University of Lincoln.

Our Purpose

We transform lives and communities, attracting talent from around the globe to create, for Lincolnshire and communities across the world, a virtuous circle of opportunity, prosperity, and economic growth.

Our strategic plan 2022-27 sets an ambition to be the best university we can be so we can continue fulfilling our purpose to support the needs and aspirations of people across Lincolnshire. Our goal is to rank among the UK's top 40 universities and the global top 500 by 2027.

However, the past year has brought about an unprecedented financial crisis in UK higher education. Universities now lose billions of pounds delivering teaching and research as inflation erodes funding. Students are experiencing a cost-of-learning crisis driven by real-terms cuts in maintenance support. International students are turning their backs on the UK as a global study destination. Costs from pensions to energy bills are increasing as income stalls. It is a perfect storm.

This Manifesto

A UK General Election will be held on 4 July 2024. The University of Lincoln is politically independent and impartial. This manifesto aims to help our local parliamentary candidates understand the pressures facing universities like us, our students, and the communities we serve, as well as potential policy solutions, whether in government or opposition. It will show that political solutions will be needed from the next government to ensure UK higher education remains sustainable and maintains its global reputation. We hope it also illustrates the powerful role the University of Lincoln has in supporting economic growth and in boosting the life chances of young people in the region, and the bright future we can continue to forge for Lincolnshire.

Summary

1 **Recognise a university's purpose is linked to place**

Universities which can be levers for economic growth and educational opportunity in places that most need these benefits risk being labelled 'low quality' if metrics do not take into account such differences between student demographics.

2 **Restore maintenance support for poorer students**

Successive below-inflation increases in Maintenance Loan levels mean families get considerably less financial help to fund their children through university than they did just a few years ago. These real-terms cuts mean students have been made poorer and parents forced to pay more.

3 **Reverse real-terms cuts to undergraduate teaching**

Universities' core unit of funding, the undergraduate tuition fee, has been frozen since 2017 and is now worth around a third less in real terms, with per student funding at its lowest level since the late 1990s.

4 **Recommit to welcoming international students**

A sudden collapse in international student enrolments, prompted by tightening of visa rules, risks depriving the Treasury and British businesses of billions in lost income and denting the UK's global reputation. It also pushes universities to the edge of a financial precipice.

5 **Address the £5bn "gap" in research funding**

Universities lose around £5bn on undertaking the R&D which delivers the innovations and insights a modern economy thrives on. Only a small number of very wealthy universities are sufficiently insulated to buffer this loss-leading research activity.

6 **Support the full range of higher skills routes**

A false dichotomy between apprenticeships and degree level study – misleadingly framed as a choice between valuable technical and vocational training versus esoteric academic education -- risks depriving industry of the skills and knowledge a 21st Century economy needs.

7 **Create parity on pensions for post-92 universities**

The Teachers' Pension Scheme is now one of the most expensive pension schemes for employers in the UK with contributions rising to 28.6% in April 2024. By contrast, the USS has an employers' contribution rate of 14.5%.

National Context

Any incoming government faces some serious challenges. Global events such as Covid-19 and the war in Ukraine have added to the national debt. The UK population's demand for public services cannot currently be met from the public finances. The economy is not growing very fast and productivity has stalled. Median household incomes have dropped in real terms, there is a widening gap between the richest and poorest, and significant income disparity between the regions of the UK.

On top of this there are a set of interrelated challenges: an ageing population requiring increasing access to health and social care; climate change placing demands on current inadequate infrastructure; the desire to transition to greener energy, changing the means of energy production, and patterns of distribution and consumption; the need to provide sufficient food without overreliance on imports; and the need to be able to defend the nation and our allies from aggressive state actors.

None of these problems will be solved without the development of a skilled and motivated workforce; the creation and application of innovative solutions; and the appropriate utilisation of technology.

The University of Lincoln not only operates within this national context but has the capability to help address the challenges though the development of the regional workforce though education and training, and application of innovative solutions through research and knowledge transfer.

Regional Context

It could be argued that the challenges encountered at the UK level are magnified within the Lincolnshire region. For example:

- **Median pay in 2023 within Lincolnshire was 7.7% lower than the English average and at the Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) level, Greater Lincolnshire ranks 29th out of 38 LEP areas. Regions such as Thames Valley, Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire have median incomes between 20-25% higher than Greater Lincolnshire.**
- **Output per job in Greater Lincolnshire is £49,000, 16% below the UK average.**
- **25% of the Greater Lincolnshire population is qualified at Level 4 or above, compared to the UK average of 34%.**
- **Research and Development spend per FTE job is only £353 in Greater Lincolnshire compared to the UK average of £1,638.**

These data are also subject to huge spatial inequalities. For example, in 2018 average household income in Skegness was less than £30,000 while in Stamford it was greater than £45,000. Similar disparities can be given for qualifications, productivity and investment.

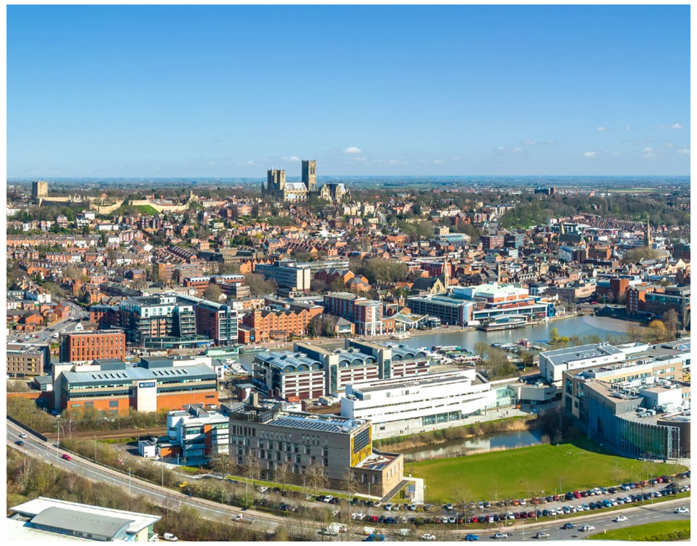
More positively Greater Lincolnshire has huge potential and will be central to ensuring the energy security, food security and supply chain security for the UK together with making significant contributions to the defence of the nation. For example, Greater Lincolnshire:

- **Processes 70% of the UK's seafood.**
- **Grows 30% of the UK's vegetables.**
- **Generates or on-shores 25% of the UK's energy.**
- **Houses major decarbonization, carbon capture and hydrogen production projects.**
- **Is home to the UK's leading offshore windfarm operations and maintenance hub (Grimsby).**
- **Sees 16% of England's port freight and 25% of all rail freight travels through it.**
- **Is home to some of the UK's most strategic airbases and intelligence gathering operations.**

Devolution for Greater Lincolnshire has become a reality with the combined county authority expected to be formed in late 2024 and a mayor elected in May 2025, forming a Mayoral Combined County Authority (MCCA). This will bring some £720m extra into the county over the next 30 years. The adult education budget (currently £18m/year) will be transferred to the MCCA. Three new decision-making boards will be part of the MCCA to help distribute the extra income: Transport; Skills and Employment; and Business and Growth. The latter two will align with the contribution the University is currently making to the region.

In addition to the MCCA, the Humber Freeport was formally established in 2023 with sites in Goole, East Hull, Grimsby, and Immingham. The aim is to stimulate trade and long term investment, creating highly skilled jobs and boosting productivity. The freeport also gives the University an outlet for its contributions.

Our Requests



Recognise a University's Purpose is Linked to Place

The University of Lincoln was created by local people, businesses and civic leaders almost 30 years ago to underpin economic regeneration in the county of Lincolnshire and to expand opportunity for young people.[1]

Ninety seven per cent of our undergraduates come from state school backgrounds and one in five are from low participation neighbourhoods. Our continuation, completion and progression rates are above the national benchmarks: 94% of our first degree entrants continue with their studies from year one to year two. Nine out of ten of our recent graduates are in work or further study 15 months after completing their course, and almost four in five are working in highly-skilled roles which fit with their future plans.

As discussed above, Lincolnshire still faces many economic challenges, relative to other parts of the UK, but also has a number of unique opportunities ahead. Universities like ours can be engines for regional growth, prosperity and opportunity.[2] There are more than 130 mainstream universities and many more higher education providers, and each one is uniquely connected to its place: from coastal towns to industrial cities. They are powerful levers in levelling up.[3] Circumstances of geography, demographics and economics shape the students who enrol, the businesses universities interact with, the spillover benefits to local communities, and the job opportunities graduates enjoy.

In general, students attend a university near their family home and to stay in the same area to work once they graduate.[4] The tendency to study locally is more pronounced among students from less wealthy backgrounds.[5] Geography is not irrelevant to where students come from or where they go onto work as graduates after their degrees. Metrics of 'graduate outcomes' used to rank the quality of courses and whole institutions come with pre-existing regional inequalities baked in. If the effects of place are poorly understood by policymakers, universities in less affluent parts of the UK in effect risk being punished for not being located in London and the South East, where average salaries (and living costs) are higher.[6] Even noble attempts to measure the 'social mobility' impact of universities fail to account fully for the tendency to stay local post-graduation, favouring London-based universities.[7]

Drop-out rates are also used as a yardstick for quality. The reason students drop out of university are complex but mental health and well-being and financial pressures are among the most commonly cited issues.[8] The 'cost-of-learning crisis' is amplifying these pressures, which are felt most acutely by students from poorer backgrounds who do not have high levels of financial support from parents.[9]

Universities which can be levers for economic growth and educational opportunity in places that most need these benefits risk being labelled 'low quality' if metrics do not take into account such differences between student demographics. This pattern would be self-reinforcing. Universities are threatened with sanction and course closures if metrics drop below thresholds for graduate outcomes, including drop-out rates and graduate prospects.

Solution:

- Adjust outcome measures to recognise regional variations in opportunity and employment.

Restore Maintenance Support for Poorer Students

Successive below-inflation increases in Maintenance Loan levels mean families get considerably less financial help to fund their children through university than they did just a few years ago.[10] These real-terms cuts mean students have been made poorer and parents forced to pay more.

The income thresholds at which students qualify for financial support have been frozen since 2008.[11] As inflation bites, it's a double-whammy for families: fewer students qualify for Maintenance Loans and those that do get less. A record number of undergraduates – more than half — now balance their studies with part-time paid jobs.[12] This risks placing less-privileged students at a disadvantage academically compared to wealthier peers.[13] The pressure to earn hits hardest at students on teaching-intensive courses, such as healthcare and STEM courses, where timetables and placement hours leave fewer gaps for paid work.

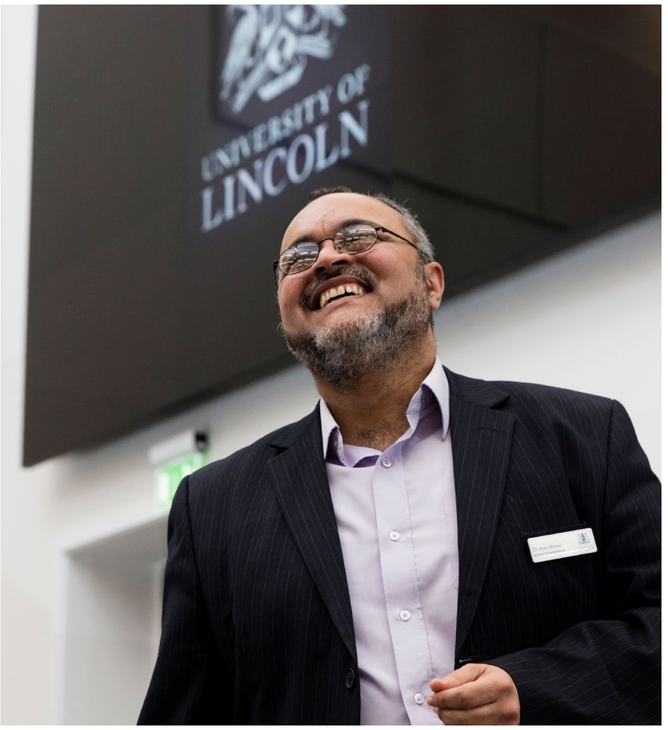
Surveys show young people from poorer backgrounds are being deterred from going to university due to worries about how they will pay rent, transport costs or food bills, while some enrolled students fear they will have to drop out due to the growing 'cost of learning crisis'.[14] Others are skipping meals and using food banks.[15] Some students stay at home with parents and commute to classes to keep costs down but even they risk missing out on campus-based sporting, social and extracurricular experiences valued by employers.[16] Students from the poorest backgrounds are three times more likely to live in the family home and commute short distances to a local university (rather than move away and live in halls) compared to wealthier peers.[17] In geographically dispersed places like Lincolnshire and the East of England with patchy public transport, commuting is not always an option. In London – blessed with many higher education providers and excellent public transport — one in two 18-year-olds went to university in 2023. In some boroughs it was two in three. In the East Midlands, one in three 18-year-olds enrols at university.[18]

The entry rate across Lincolnshire's seven Parliamentary constituencies has dropped for two consecutive years and stands below the national average at just over 30%. Starving young people of adequate funding to cover living costs while at university could cement already deep-rooted regional inequalities: it's an anti-levelling up policy.

We should avoid sleepwalking towards a two-tier system of university access and experience, defined by family wealth or quirks of geography and transport infrastructure. It is all the more difficult to justify when most graduates will pay back their student loans in full later in life.[19] Recent reforms to loan repayment thresholds have moved even more of the cost of higher education from the state onto individuals.[20]

Solutions:

- Update parental income qualifying thresholds for Maintenance Loans
- Fix the funding gap created by successive below-inflation increases in loan amounts
- Reintroduce means-tested grants for students from low income backgrounds
- Expand grants or bursaries for high-priority subject areas with intensive teaching demands
- Steer direct grant funding towards universities with greater proportions of students from disadvantaged backgrounds
- Review geographic disparities in university participation rates to tackle cold spots.



Reverse Real-terms Cuts to Funding of Undergraduate Teaching

Universities' core unit of funding, the undergraduate tuition fee, has been frozen by the UK Government at £9,250 since 2017 and will remain frozen until at least 2025.[21] It is now worth around a third less in real terms compared to when the new fee system was introduced just over a decade ago.[22] Per student funding is at its lowest level since the late 1990s.[23]

Teaching and research are the core activities of universities: both have become financial loss-leaders.[24] UK universities now make an aggregate loss of almost £1bn on teaching British students.[25] They also lose more than £4bn on undertaking government-funded research, where less than three quarters of costs are recovered. Until recently, the higher fees paid by international students covered much of this gap. This de-facto subsidy is now in jeopardy as international enrolments plummet amid anti-immigration policies and rhetoric.

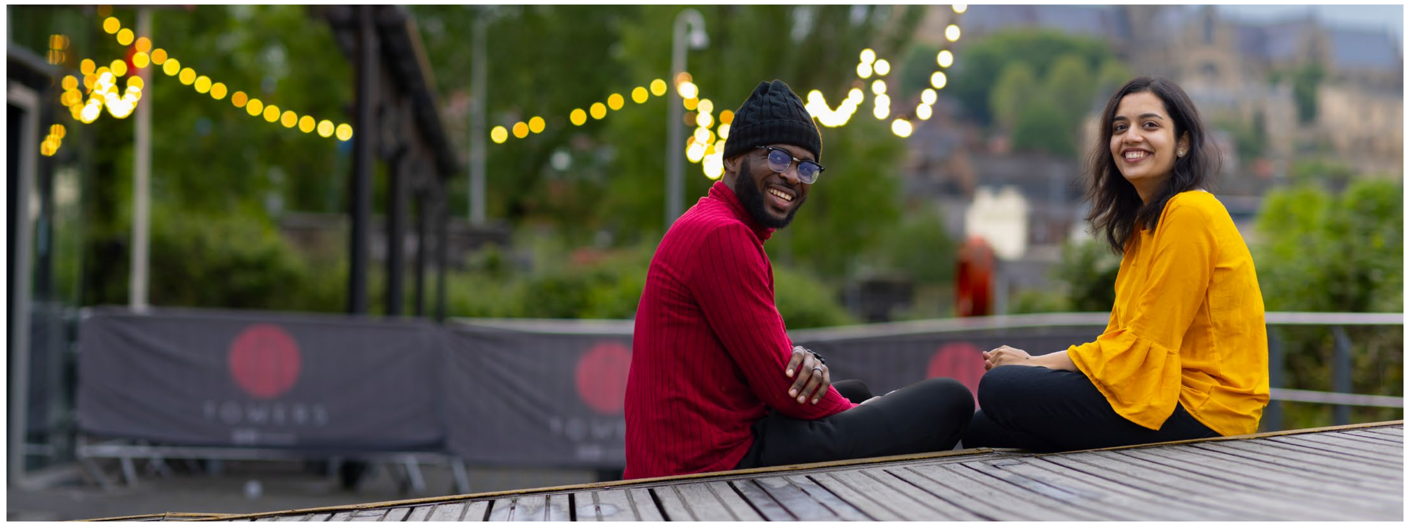
The independent Browne and Augur reviews of education funding aimed to raise quality and ensure value for money for students and taxpayers while providing a stable funding system for universities. Neither proposed core funding be cut so dramatically. Augur's £7,500 baseline fee was to be offset by more direct grant funding for higher-cost subjects.[26] Investment in universities pays back with interest through graduates' higher earnings (via taxation) and enhanced productivity of the UK.[27] On average male graduates earn £130,000 more over their lifetime and female graduates earn £100,000 more than if they had not gone to university, even after loan repayments and higher taxes are considered.[28]

Like increasing Maintenance Loan levels in line with inflation, correcting the real terms cut in tuition fees would not overburden taxpayers because graduates would cover much of the extra cost as they repay student loans over their working lives. Paying universities for the true price of providing high quality teaching and support would put more money into students' pockets when they need it most – while they are studying – because fees also pay for student support services.

Political or public opposition to tuition fee increases could be overcome by recognising that the loan repayment system operates more like a graduate contribution than a debt and that most of the (largely notional) taxpayer investment is paid back through future graduate earnings.[29] Avoiding the misleading language of student 'debt' should also prevent less-wealthy students, who tend to be more debt-averse, being put off university by perceived cost and missing out on higher education's benefits to life chances, career opportunities and lifetime earnings.

Solutions:

- Restore UK undergraduate tuition fees to 2017 levels, adjusted for inflation, or off-set real terms cuts through greater direct teaching grant funding
- Link tuition fees to inflation so they rise annually in a way students, taxpayers, universities and politicians can predict
- Reshape student loan repayments as a Graduate Contribution System to better reflect the system's design.



Recommit to Welcoming International Students

The UK's *International Education Strategy*[30] published in 2019 set a goal of attracting 600,000 international students to study in the UK by 2030. It praised our "world-class" higher education sector as contributing £20bn a year to the UK economy, bolstering our economic, diplomatic and soft power interests globally. Among its five key actions was to "continue to provide a welcoming environment for international students and develop an increasingly competitive offer". In 2023, the Government re-affirmed its commitment to those ambitions. Universities met the 600,000 target almost a decade early as global markets bounced back post-pandemic.[31]

Recent analysis puts the total economic benefit to the UK of a single cohort of international students at £41bn – roughly the entire turnover of UK universities. In Lincoln alone, the value of international students to the local economy is around £130m.[32] A sudden collapse in international student enrolments, prompted by tightening of visa rules, risks depriving the Treasury and British businesses of billions in lost income and denting the UK's global reputation. It also pushes universities to the edge of a financial precipice.

The temptation to "clamp down" on international students is partly down to problems of data collection, definition and interpretation.[33] International students are not long-term migrants; most stay for the duration of their course then leave. Office for National Statistics data suggests 83% return home within five years.[34] Problems of definition are compounded by problems of methodology. Immigration figures count real people arriving at border control. Emigration figures rely on passenger surveys prone to sampling errors.[35]

International students are a soft target for those wanting to be seen as tough on immigration because, at face value, they constitute a substantial share of the UK's net migration flows. Measures to reduce their numbers are relatively simple. Reducing the attractiveness of the UK to international students will do little to stop illegal immigration or to save lives in the English Channel. It will hand other English-speaking countries like the US, Canada, Australia and New Zealand a competitive advantage in the global higher education market at a time the UK economy can scarcely afford it.[36]

Solutions:

- Review how international students are counted and reported in net migration data
- Reinstate the dependants' visa for international students
- Challenge false claims about international students displacing British students
- Reaffirm the UK's welcoming attitude to international students
- Support sector campaigns to highlight the economic, social and diplomatic (soft power) benefits of international students to the UK.

Address the £5bn "Gap" In Research Funding

The biggest financial loss-leader universities face is funding of research. In total, universities lose around £5bn on undertaking the R&D which delivers the innovations and insights a modern economy thrives on.[37]

Public funding of university research is based on a "dual support system".[38] This consists of block grants, allocated competitively which give universities discretion to spend flexibly, and research grants for specific research projects, mainly allocated through funding councils under the auspices of UKRI.

The real-terms value of QR funding has fallen by at least 12% over the last decade.[39] UKRI research grants cover only 80% of the Full Economic Cost (FEC) of research projects. Universities are expected to make up the remaining 20% from other sources. Universities are well-versed at collaborating with industry on applied research but, in practice, universities recover just over two thirds of the costs of grant-funded research.[40] Until recently, much of that "gap" has been filled by international student fees. With that de facto subsidy rapidly shrinking, there are new risks to individual institutions' ability to conduct high quality research.

The Government target for national R&D spending is 2.4% of GDP by 2027. This target was reached five years early, following changes in methodology made by the Office for National Statistics in 2022 which led to a near 60% increase in estimated research spending by businesses. This change was criticised as "rushed" by the journal *Nature*.[41] At 2.9%, the UK still sits behind the USA, Germany and Japan among G7 nations on R&D spending as a share of GDP.[42]

Under-funding of research poses particular problems for the training of postgraduate research students, where universities recover less than half of the full economic cost of supporting PhDs. These are the next generation of research specialists – not just in universities, but also in UK industries like our finance, pharmaceuticals and technology sectors. The impacts are likely to be unevenly distributed around the country. Only a small number of very wealthy universities are sufficiently insulated to buffer loss-leading research activity from other sources, such as investments, endowments and donations.[43] The benefits of research to society and business will need to be spread more widely to close regional economic inequalities, boost growth, and catalyse innovation in key industries.[44]

In our region, the University of Lincoln is leading innovations in food security and sustainability through its R&D in agri-tech and related disciplines.[45] We are collaborating on efforts to decarbonise the Humber Cluster – the biggest single source of industrial carbon emissions in the UK. We support the security of the UK through research in areas of defence, security and intelligence. Alongside this applied research, we are contributing to scholarship in other areas of academic excellence, such as in History, reflecting the city of Lincoln's rich Roman heritage. In the last national Research Excellence Framework (REF 2021), our research in the History subject area ranked number one in the UK for the proportion of world-leading (four-star) publications.[46]

Solutions:

- Develop a long-term Research Strategy to give universities and industry confidence to invest in research
- Review the 80% FEC funding model for UKRI grant funding
- Address the real-terms decline of QR funding
- Incorporate postgraduate research students (PGRs) and early career researchers (ECRS) into a future Skills Strategy and Research Strategy

Support the Full Range of Higher Skills Routes

Labour market demand for graduates keeps growing.[47] A false dichotomy between apprenticeships and degree level study – misleadingly framed as a choice between valuable technical and vocational training versus esoteric academic education — risks depriving industry of the skills and knowledge a 21st Century economy needs.

It's postgraduates, PhDs and post-doctoral students driving innovations in technology, social sciences, humanities and the arts. A cold comparison of apprenticeships and degree study reveals some inconvenient truths. The number of apprenticeship starts has fallen by a third since the Apprenticeship Levy was introduced in 2017 with the sharpest drop among under-19s.[48 49] Around half of GCSE students consider apprenticeships among their post-16 options, according to UCAS and the Sutton Trust.[50] A similar share (40%) of university applicants (around 430,000 people) also express interest in apprenticeships when thinking about post-18 choices. Yet just 5,000 people aged under-19 get a place on a Higher Apprenticeship (at Level 4, equivalent to the first year of a Bachelor's degree). Almost 300,000 UK 18-year-olds gained a place at university through UCAS in 2023.[51]

Evidence shows convincingly this is a supply-side problem. There are not enough good quality apprenticeships, especially for young people, despite all the incentives for employers and learners created by the levy.[52] Serious concerns persist about quality, oversight and misuses of the levy funding system too.[53] Just 54% of apprentices complete their qualification.[54] The completion rate for university undergraduates is almost 90%.[55] Less than two thirds of apprentices say they would recommend doing an apprenticeship to a friend or family member.[56] Around three quarters of final year undergraduates say they are satisfied with their course overall.[57] Proportionately, young people from the poorest backgrounds (qualifying for free school meals) are better represented in universities than on apprenticeships.[58]

Universities have been working with employers of varied sizes and sectors for decades to meet skills needs at all stages of the skills pipeline: from integrated years in industry to knowledge transfer partnerships. They have the expertise and infrastructure to provide the support learners need in and outside of the workplace, working collaboratively with employers. They have helped to design and deliver degree apprenticeships too – one of the successful growth areas in apprenticeships provision since the 2017 changes. Universities track record on widening participation is strong.

The narrow focus and preferential funding directed at apprenticeships, often to the detriment of degree study, is harmful to learners, employers and education providers.[59] The Apprenticeship Levy now generates a surplus for the Treasury as inflation pushes more businesses into the qualifying thresholds, even as apprenticeship numbers dwindle.[60] The economy needs more graduates, not less, and demand for advanced skills will only increase as technological advances transform the nature of work.[61]

High quality apprenticeships are a valuable element of the skills mix but they are not the abundant alternative to degree study presented by some. The UK needs a coherent and integrated skills strategy that recognises the value of the full range of study options, including progression routes from Level 4-6 qualifications through to postgraduate study and beyond. It must meet the needs and capabilities of employers to support work-based learners – be they apprentices, placement students or graduates. Scrutiny on access, quality, student satisfaction, progression and value for money should be applied equally too.

Solutions:

- Reshape the Apprenticeship Levy as a Flexible Skills Levy which can fund a wider array of provision
- Devolve more decision-making and skills funding to regional bodies (eg. Local Enterprise Partnerships, Mayoral Authorities and University Enterprise Zones)
- Recognise and support universities' track record of collaborating with employers on skills
- Stop pitching apprenticeships against university education.

Create Parity on Pensions for Post-92 Universities

Many teaching staff in post-92 universities are members of the Teachers' Pension Scheme (TPS). This differs from the Universities Superannuation Scheme (USS) common in older universities.

The TPS is an unfunded public service pension scheme, so all contributions are paid to HM Treasury rather than invested in a pension 'fund'. Employer contributions to the TPS increased in April 2024 from 23.6% to 28.6% following a government revaluation of the scheme.[62] This followed a 40% increase in employer contributions to the scheme in 2019. The TPS is now one of the most expensive pension schemes for employers in the UK. By contrast, the USS has an employers' contribution rate of 14.5%.

The Government is covering the added cost of employer contributions to TPS for state-funded schools and further education colleges in England in 2024/25 but not for universities (or independent schools), arguing that they are autonomous institutions.

A number of independent schools have withdrawn from the TPS, prompting threats of industrial action. Universities which are former polytechnics are required by law to offer the TPS. The Universities and Colleges Employers Association (UCEA) and Universities UK (UUK) have asked the Government to reconsider this stance or to cover the added costs to universities, as they have for state schools and colleges.[63] The University and College Union (UCU) opposes post-92 universities being allowed to withdraw from offering the TPS.[64]

The cost of the increase in employers' contributions to the TPS for the University of Lincoln is approximately £2.4m in 2024/25. This is money paid directly from the University to HM Treasury with no benefit to pension scheme members, because of the unfunded nature of the scheme.[65]

Solutions:

- Provide transitional funding support to post-92 universities to cover extra pension costs
- Review how the unfunded public service pension schemes such as TPS are revalued and increases implemented
- Review historic obligations which require former polytechnics to offer TPS.

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