



6 Ways UK Higher Education is Stifling Innovation

Description

UK higher education is in desperate need of reform, according to the seventh annual [Higher Education Survey](#) conducted by PA consulting.

This year's report focuses on the topic of **innovation in higher education** and is based on the responses of 50 vice chancellors and other leaders of **UK universities**. As well as voicing concerns about the UK higher education sector's failure to keep up with the pace of innovation seen elsewhere in the world, the study also offers some practical recommendations.

The call for **education reform** in the UK comes from many angles. Students are demanding more flexible and affordable study options, new technologies are disrupting traditional teaching models, and internationalization has led to ramped-up global competition.

Based on the 2015 Higher Education Survey, the six biggest "constraints to innovation" in UK higher education are:

1. Deep-seated conservatism

Resistance to change is identified as one of the main reasons UK higher education is failing to keep pace. Causes of the "deeply entrenched culture of conservatism" in UK universities include inflexible organization, systems and processes; aging workforces; and risk-averse leadership teams. For some respondents to the survey, the personal risk of driving reform is also acknowledged, with reference to recent cases in the UK and the US where vice chancellors were effectively removed from their posts for trying to promote education reform.

2. Inflexible organizational structures

Despite the UK's world-class reputation for teaching and research, many survey respondents admitted that many important innovations "with the exception of curriculum modernization" were

happening mostly outside of the UK. UK higher education providers were perceived as lagging in terms of student mobility, use of student analytics and the unbundling of academic services.

According to respondents, constraints set out by regulatory bodies often act as barriers to education reform, with 65% putting emphasis on the role of professional and statutory bodies and 47% highlighting the inhibiting nature of consumer legislation and advocates.

3. Initiatives for change lack clarity

Without the backing of the UK government in providing improved budgets for education reform, many UK universities are forced to find their own ways to make funding stretch further. This can mean channeling budgets into digital enterprises in order to cut down on existing costs, while also more effectively catering to the expectations of a digital generation of students. However, uncertainty within the sector – along with further funding cut-backs – means education reform is often tentative at best, with an urgent need for top-tier policy makers and university officials to clarify strategies for digitalization and internationalization.

Some 47% of those surveyed said the shortage of capital funding (both public and private) for investments considered – risky – was proving a major constraint to education reform.

4. Lack of incentives for innovation

When asked about the importance of government policies to help drive innovation, a majority (50-65%) acknowledged that policy changes to student funding, new entrants, international regulation and alternative pathways of learning had created pressure for innovation in higher education. Yet few believed the UK government is actively supporting or encouraging these changes. Without backing from the government, UK universities are less likely to bring about major change. – Compared to other sectors, the conditions to drive innovation are just not there, – one respondent said.

Another explains that – if the need for education reform is ignored for too long – there’s a risk that the UK university system will become – a museum of 20th century education, while the rest of the world moves on. –

5. Misguided confidence in the status quo

UK higher education is suffering from misguided confidence in the security of its global market position, indulging in what the report calls – the illusory comforts of the status quo –. Almost 70% of those surveyed expect the status quo to continue, with student demand remaining largely focused on full-time, three-year, on-campus degrees. Substantial shifts to alternative models of study and online learning (by alternative providers) were perceived as unlikely by almost half of respondents.

But despite confidence in the short-term, many surveyed vice chancellors had significant concerns for the medium-term outlook, with 25% saying maintaining student demand and research funding were major constraints to forward planning. A lack of projected future growth was also a concern, with a

large majority of respondents (76%) predicting little or no growth over the next five to ten years in most current areas of teaching and research, while 56% expressed skepticism about offshore market growth. While 40-45% predicted healthy growth in online learning and vocational short courses, the majority were not so optimistic.

6. Innovation in higher education perceived as ‘‘marginal’’

When asked to judge the importance of innovation for the purpose of providing ‘‘more flexible and accessible pathways into and through HE for different student groups’’, respondents were divided. Around a third of those surveyed saw student mobility and the use of international partnerships as low priorities. But others identified these as particularly important focus areas, highlighting the role of various kinds of collaboration ‘‘with schools, other HEIs, private providers and employers’’ in establishing ‘‘progressive learner pathways’’.

Despite acknowledgement of the importance of using student analytics to personalize student journeys during recruitment and after enrollment, over two-thirds of those surveyed said they had made ‘‘little or no progress’’ towards this. One respondent stated: ‘‘With regard to technology-enhanced learning, we are among UK sector leaders, but have actually made only limited progress.’’

The conflict between profit and ambition is also an issue here. While the majority of UK universities have ambitions to grow their research output, growth in research income is predicted to be minimal. So while a high priority in many senses, research is considered ‘‘marginal’’ in financial terms.

The full report is [available to read online](#), and you can [follow us on Twitter](#) for more higher education news.