

Coordinating Lobbying and Campaigning in the UK Higher Education Crisis: Mapping Stakeholder Initiatives and Opportunities for UCU

Introduction

UCU launched its Stop the Cuts campaign in March 2025 to mobilise staff and students against redundancies and closures and to demand urgent government action on catastrophic cuts across the sector. But in part because of the scale of the crisis of a HE sector in “freefall,” a range of other stakeholders—including Universities UK (UUK), the British Academy, the Independent Social Research Foundation (ISRF), the Council for the Defence of British Universities (CDBU), and various think tanks—have also begun lobbying, publishing data, and attempting to shape the public narrative on this crisis and where we go from here. No single voice has yet articulated a comprehensive solution and most lobbying initiatives are individual rather than collective stakeholder efforts.

UCU’s Stop the Cuts campaign is an important intervention for structural reform of HE funding, but there is scope to do more: to coordinate with allies, to contribute unique local data, and to develop a narrative that speaks to both economic and intrinsic values of higher education.

This paper maps those initiatives with two goals in mind:

- To provide UCU’s Higher Education Committee (HEC) with a clear overview of the current HE lobbying landscape.
- To ask how UCU might coordinate and synergise its industrial campaigning with wider sector lobbying, and what distinctive evidence the union can contribute — particularly at branch and local levels — to strengthen arguments about the impacts of these cuts on local communities, widening participation efforts, and regions.

1. The Scale of the Crisis

Evidence of systemic fragility is mounting:

- Financial decline: Universities UK (June 2025) projects widespread deficits across the sector, with four in ten institutions facing acute financial challenges. The *Guardian* (May 2025) reported that universities’ income had fallen for a third consecutive year.

- Redundancies and closures: QMUL UCU maintains a live tracker of restructures, redundancies, and course closures across the UK. Patterns show disproportionate impacts on arts, humanities, and post-1992 institutions.
- Productivity and inequality: HEPI (February 2024), the UK's only independent think tank devoted to education, released a report linking the availability of HE provision to local skill levels and productivity, warning that further cuts will exacerbate entrenched regional inequality.
- Media consensus: Recent coverage in the *Financial Times*, BBC, *Times*, *LRB* stresses both the scale of financial decline and the erosion of the cultural and democratic role of universities.

The sector is thus confronting both economic and civic-cultural crises: financial unsustainability alongside the weakening of universities as public institutions.

2. Stakeholder Data and Evidence Initiatives

Several organisations are producing evidence bases that attempt to shape UK policy debates by highlighting the societal impacts of these cuts to our sector (or the direct correlation between funding cuts and current government policy):

- HEPI (2024): Explored the association between HE provision, skills, and productivity, presenting universities as a lever for inclusive growth.
- British Academy (2024): Launched an interactive map of “cold spots” in SHAPE subjects (social sciences, humanities, and arts), highlighting regional inequalities in provision.
- UUK (2025): Modelled the financial impact of current government policy decisions, demonstrating the systemic nature of the crisis.
- QMUL UCU Tracker (2025): Documents live cases of restructures, redundancies, and closures across the sector.
- School of Advanced Study Humanities Summits (2025): Gathered funders, professional associations, and faculty leaders to call for stronger lobbying and a reframing of the public case for the humanities (and HE) as a public good.

Implication for UCU:

Much of this data comes from think tanks, funders, or institutional associations. UCU, by contrast, holds granular information at branch level — where courses are closing, which communities are losing access, how staff and students are affected. A central strategic question is therefore: what additional local data can UCU provide?

Beyond documenting course closures and redundancies, UCU is uniquely positioned to evidence at branch- and regional-level:

- Widening participation gaps emerging in different regions.
- Economic effects on local communities and cities where universities are major employers.
- Knock-on impacts of restructures and job losses for civic life, public services, and graduate pipelines.

Developing this evidence base would enable UCU to complement and extend the data produced by other sector stakeholders, while asserting the union's role as the organisation best placed to demonstrate the human and community-level consequences of these cuts.

3. Stakeholder Lobbying and Advocacy

3.1 Independent Social Research Foundation (ISRF)

In July 2025 the ISRF published **A New Regulatory Framework for University Cuts**, proposing mechanisms to govern and mitigate the impact of redundancies and closures.

3.2 British Academy

In July 2025, the incoming President of the British Academy publicly urged the Prime Minister to “**strengthen and champion**” UK universities. The Academy has become increasingly vocal in defending the cultural and civic value of the humanities and social sciences, while also making growth-related arguments.

3.3 Council for the Defence of British Universities (CDBU)

Founded in 2012, the CDBU defends institutional autonomy, academic freedom, inclusive access, and the recognition of HE as a public good. In 2024 it published **University Governance: Views from the Inside** (Steven Jones and Diane Harris), based on interviews across 41 institutions. In May 2025 it launched **The CDBU Code of**

Ethical University Governance, which calls for governors to act as ambassadors for the sector and to embed higher education's public mission in governance practice.

Notably, UCU has already begun engaging with the CDBU: Steven Jones, lead author of the governance report, has been invited to speak at UCU HE policy events. This indicates scope for deeper collaboration, particularly around shared concerns with governance, accountability, and the erosion of academic values under managerialism.

3.4 Humanities Summits

The 2025 Summits convened by the School of Advanced Study foregrounded the lack of coherent lobbying across the sector. James Coe (Director, Counterculture Scotland) argued that while creative industries produce growth, they also carry intrinsic civic value — and that both sides of that case must be articulated to demonstrate what the arts (and HE) brings to working-class communities if we want to shift the political conversation on HE as a public good.

4. Recent Media and Political Coverage

In part because of its scale, the HE crisis is increasingly framed in mainstream media outlets as structural and urgent:

- *Financial Times* (March, July 2025): “Academic recession” and long-term decline.
- BBC (March 2025): “Four in ten universities face financial challenges.”
- *The Times* (May 2025): “University crisis demands a complete reboot.”
- *Guardian* (May 2025): “Universities’ income falls for third consecutive year.”
- *London Review of Books / History Workshop* (2025): Academic commentary stressing cultural stakes and the erosion of trust.
- Parliamentary concern: Education Committee Chair Helen Hayes (Labour MP for Dulwich and West Norwood) warned in March 2025 of a “crunch point,” emphasising the sector could not weather further cuts.

This coverage amplifies the urgency of system HE funding reform but has yet to translate into either a coherent government response or coordinated lobbying effort across the sector.

5. Strategic Implications for UCU

5.1 Visibility and Leadership

There is an opportunity to broaden the union's lobbying profile by engaging proactively with stakeholders like the British Academy, ISRF, and CDBU.

5.2 Narrative and Messaging

Stakeholders consistently stress that economic arguments alone are insufficient. The case for HE must combine its role in inclusive growth with its intrinsic civic, cultural, and intellectual value. UCU can play a key role in developing and amplifying that narrative, especially by connecting it to the lived experiences of staff and students.

5.3 Coalitions and Partnerships

Potential alliances include:

- British Academy: shared interest in regional access and defending SHAPE subjects.
- CDBU: shared concern with governance, managerialism, and public accountability.
- ISRF: policy-oriented framework proposals.
- Humanities Summits network: collective lobbying base.

5.4 Data and Evidence

A pressing question for UCU is: what wider local data can branches supply to strengthen lobbying beyond documenting redundancies?

- Mapping widening participation gaps that result from course closures.
- Evidencing the economic impact of job losses and restructures on cities and regions.
- Tracking knock-on effects on local schools, employers¹, and civic life.

¹ For example, a HEPI/Kaplan study from June 2024 determined the economic effect of overseas students at a constituency level (both gross and net of increased costs of services). Similar data for total economic effect would form a good talking point for MP surgeries, local civic groups, and so on.
<https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2024/06/20/new-constituency-level-data-prove-the-value-of-international-students-to-the-uk/>

This type of data could help to evidence the scale of the crisis but also amplify the urgency of the need for a system overhaul of UK HE funding as well as making the case for HE as a social good.

5.5 Integrating Campaigning and Lobbying

In this new landscape, UCU has the opportunity to integrate its campaigning energy with proactive lobbying for long-term funding reform, ensuring that UCU is not just fighting redundancies but shaping the sector's future.

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