UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

DEGREES OF INNOVATION

How London's universities transformed higher education in the UK and abroad

Richard Brown

March 2026

Table of Contents

Foreword by Professor David Latchman,

Deputy Vice-Chancellor, University of London

As someone who has worked within the University of London Federation for most of my career – first at UCL, then at Birkbeck – I know that it is a unique organisation.

It is widely known that University of London was the first English university to admit students regardless of faith, and then the first to award degrees to women. But as Degrees of Innovation shows, its record of innovation goes far deeper than that. It was also a pioneer in distance learning, in lifelong learning and in 'opening access' to students from less privileged backgrounds. The University has benefited massively from being able to draw on London's boundless energy and talent but has also contributed to attracting and retaining talent from around the world. As a result, it has made profound contributions to the humanities and the sciences, to more theoretical and more practical subjects, and to the development of higher education across the world.

However, Degrees of Innovation does not just look back but forward. And as the contributions in the second half of this publication attest, the Federation is ready to innovate to meet the challenges ahead. Our long experience in distance learning means we are well positioned to make the best of new technologies and the inexorable rise of online and blended teaching – and worldwide respect for the University of London brand.

Our pioneering record in adult education and the breadth and specialisations of our Federation means that we can deliver on the lifelong learning agenda across the full range of subject areas and with effective credit transfer, working over time with other universities in London and across the UK.

The highly networked nature of London's Higher Education sector, in the form of the University of London Federation, and organisations like London Higher, and our deep roots in London's communities and close ties to London government, will allow us to play our role as civic or 'anchor' institutions, and help the capital prosper.

Many congratulations and thanks to all who have contributed to this valuable and inspiring publication.

Summary

London's universities include some of the world's best, with a history stretching back 200 years. This report reviews their history and impact, on higher education, London and the world, in the light of changing social conditions and policy, and looks forward to their role in the future.

New model universities

- The foundation of University College London (UCL) in 1826, King's College London (KCL) in 1829 and the University of London (UoL) in 1836 launched a new model for higher education, and asserted higher education's importance to a city's global renown.
- These were innovative types of university – open to all (including women from 1878) on the basis of examination, non-discriminating on the grounds of religion, and broad in curriculum. Alongside them, the London Mechanics' Institute (later Birkbeck College), Regent Street Polytechnic, and subsequently other new polytechnics were established to help develop the skills of London's workers.

National and global impact

UoL was initially set up to undertake examinations and award degrees for students studying at UCL and KCL. More institutions were accredited in subsequent years, and examinations were made open to all in 1858, leading to rapid growth and fresh calls for a University *for* London...

- By the end of the 19th Century, there were more than 100 UoL examination centres, across the UK and worldwide; and two-thirds of the University's students were studying outside London, many through correspondence courses.

...and following intense and prolonged debate, in 1900 UoL was reconstituted.

- Colleges within London (including UCL, KCL, the women's colleges (Royal Holloway, Bedford and Westfield), the medical schools, the Royal College of Science and Central Technical College at South Kensington, and the London School of Economics (LSE)) were classified as 'schools' of the University, and their students were classified as 'internal' students.
- A separate 'external' examination system was retained for students studying at other institutions, though some teachers at polytechnics in London were formally 'recognised' by the University and their students were treated as 'internal' candidates.
- Through 'special relations' UoL supported the development of other universities within the UK and, after World War II, emerging universities in many former colonies.

London continues to be a global hub for higher education today:

- London universities educate around 350,000 overseas students, around a quarter of the UK total; of these 40 per cent study remotely and 60 per cent study in London (with a net economic impact of around £12.5 billion in 2024/25).
- London also has substantial numbers of students studying at overseas universities with a London campus, and at London campuses of other UK universities.
- London is regularly identified as one of the world's top student cities, and higher education continues to be a major element the UK's soft power.

Civic, economic and urban impact:

London's civil authorities played an increasingly active role building the capital's higher education system from the late 19th Century...

- Concerns about skill levels and economic competitiveness prompted City of London livery companies and charities to invest in new institutions for vocational education, including the emerging polytechnics.
- From 1893, the new London County Council began to fund polytechnics, through scholarships and a contribution to core costs, as well as supporting UoL financially and participating in its governance.
- Local authority involvement in higher education declined from the 1990s, but many London universities have been rethinking their civic and anchor institution role in recent years, working more closely with the Greater London Authority and London boroughs.

...and London universities have contributed directly to the city's economic and physical development.

- The university quarter around Bloomsbury includes UCL, KCL, LSE, SOAS, and several University of London institutes, as well as its Senate House headquarters.
- Other notable clusters include those at South Kensington (Imperial College of Science and Technology, Royal College of Art and Royal College of Music), and more recent 'regeneration' clusters at White City and Stratford.
- Higher education has become a major employer in London, with 80,000 people working in tertiary education and a further 45,000 jobs supported by the sector.
- Higher education directly accounts for around three per cent of London's economy, is a catalyst for start-ups and an anchor for new innovation districts.

Mass participation and social mobility

The 1963 Robbins Report, which heralded mass participation in higher education, changed UoL's role…

- The conversion of colleges of advanced technology to university status meant that London had new universities that were not part of UoL.
- The subsequent decision (against the recommendations of Robbins) to establish polytechnics as a separate category of 'socially controlled' institutions diminished UoL's role in awarding degrees across the sector.
- The Report initiated a process of change in UoL's federal model; in the ensuing decades, federation members began receiving funding directly, awarding their own degrees and seeking university status in their own right.

…but the capital's institutions have remained at the forefront of widening access and enabling social mobility.

- London's young people are much more likely to go to university than their counterparts in other parts of the UK, particularly among those from poorer backgrounds.
- London universities lead the way in terms of the ethnic and social diversity of their student intake, though some ethnic groups remain under-represented.
- London universities also score well in recent assessments of social mobility, which measure recruitment from disadvantaged backgrounds, and how such students fare during and after university.

The quasi-market, employability and lifelong learning

The 1997 Dearing Report focused on the economic value of higher education, emphasising the importance of transferable skills and practical work experience, setting out a vision for a lifelong learning relationship between citizens and universities…

- London universities have been innovators in the careers and work experience offer they make to students, and also in developing their distance-learning capability, including during the pandemic.
- However, the Dearing Report's vision for lifelong learning has not been realised – part-time and mature student numbers have fallen in recent years in the UK.

…and making recommendations on funding that were implemented gradually in the years that followed.

- Student numbers had risen sharply from the late 1980s, but funding did not keep pace, and controls on numbers were introduced.
- The Report proposed a new model of funding, with students contributing some of the costs of tuition, supported by loans.
- Fees were gradually introduced from 2006, and limits on student numbers and on new entrants to higher education were lifted in the following decade, leading to a 40 per cent growth in overall student numbers in the decade from 2012/13.

The current crisis and lessons from London?

Universities in the UK are facing tough financial conditions, resulting from frozen fees, inflation and restrictions on foreign students, as well as the challenges of adapting to new technology and changed behaviours following the pandemic. London's institutions are as exposed as any, but can also draw on their own rich history in finding ways to adapt:

- By using distance learning expertise to trial new models of teaching and learning in the UK and beyond, which could be both affordable for students and viable for universities;
- By building on a heritage of flexible degrees, as pioneered by Birkbeck College, to realise Dearing's vision for lifelong learning;
- By working with city government and business organisations to develop degrees and work experience programmes that enable students and employers alike to adapt to the challenges ahead.

1. Introduction – new model universities

"The people would learn and must be taught"[1]

The meeting on Friday 1 July 1825 was crowded to the rafters, according to reports in The Times. Speaking to the crowd assembled at the Crown and Anchor Tavern, a reformist crucible on Arundel Street, Baptist minister Francis Cox set out the case for a University of London: "It was remarkable that while for ages all the principal cities in the world had universities, London was destitute of one, though the metropolis of the greatest country in the world… What was to hinder London from becoming, not the commercial capital only of the world, but a centre of literature and science?"

Referring to unnamed opponents in government, Cox continued, "Could they oppose plans for the more general instruction of the people, who had themselves known the advantages of education and were giving it to their sons? … The people would learn and must be taught; and were all to unite and say London must have a university, it would be a noble, patriotic and successful resolution." Rev Cox sat down, The Times reports, to 'loud cheers'.[2]

Rev Cox's speech was delivered only a few months after an open letter in The Times had raised the idea of a university for the capital. It expresses three themes that run through the story of higher education in London: the desire to disrupt traditional models, a commitment to widening access, and the idea of education and learning being part of a city's and a nation's claim to greatness, what we would today call its 'soft power'.

The original 'University of London' was founded in 1826 as a private venture; radically, it had no religious entry requirements and no religious teaching.[3] A traditionalist counterweight, King's College (KCL), was granted a royal charter in 1829 and opened in 1831. In 1836, University of London was granted a royal charter as 'University College London' (UCL), and a separate 'University of London' (UoL) was established as the examining and degree-awarding body for students at KCL and UCL.

Other ground-breaking institutions were established in the same period. George Birkbeck founded the first London Mechanics' Institute (which later took his name as part of University of London) in 1823, to provide technical and general education to craftsmen and artisans, with others following across London and nationwide. The Royal Polytechnic Institution opened on Regent Street in 1838 as an exhibition and lecture centre, before being taken over by philanthropist Quintin Hogg in 1881 as Regent Street Polytechnic (now University of Westminster).[4]

The 1880s saw further rapid growth in institutes for technical education, driven initially by investment from the City of London's livery companies and the City and Parochial Charities Foundation, which had been impelled to invest beyond the Square Mile.[5] The City and Guilds of London was established to oversee technical education, and set up new institutes in Finsbury and South Kensington. New polytechnics were established in Borough and Battersea, the People's Palace was opened on Mile End Road, and the worshipful companies of skinners and goldsmiths opened colleges in Northampton Square (now City St George's, University of London) and in New Cross (now Goldsmiths, University of London) respectively. The role and evolution of these institutions is discussed more in Chapter 3.

1 The Times, 2 July 1825
2 The Times, op cit
3 Harte N, The University of London 1836-1986, Athlone Press 1986
4 Izbicki J, 'The London polytechnics', in Floud R and Glynn S, London Higher: the establishment of higher education in London, Bloomsbury 2002 p200
5 Glynn S, 'The City of London and higher education', in Floud and Glynn op cit pp125-131

These new institutions were disruptors, with a mission to broaden access to education (to "all between mechanics and the enormously rich", in the words of Thomas Campbell, who wrote the open letter in February 1825) in contrast to the cloistered and introspective model that still operated in Oxford and Cambridge. The approach was controversial: University of London was mocked as the "Cockney College",[6] and Birkbeck's plans to offer broader education to craftsmen were described as "scattering the seeds of evil".[7]

But the model proved popular. Initially UoL examined and offered degrees only to students studying at KCL or UCL, but the number of affiliated institutions grew rapidly. By 1853, 68 medical schools and 32 non-medical institutions – from Birmingham, to Durham, to Co Carlow in Ireland – were affiliated.[8] A new charter in 1858 reformed governance and opened UoL examinations to all comers (except in medicine). This reflected both idealism and practicality, based on a belief that neither religion, country of residence nor other circumstances should exclude individuals from degrees, and an awareness of the challenge of regulating a growing number of institutions across not only the British Isles, but also the British Empire.[9]

An 1859 magazine article celebrated the potential of this model:

> *"The Oxford don may smile over his old port at an university that will extend her hand and offer a firm grip even to the young shoemaker who studies in his garret. He may feel a little scornful of an university that gives, to the poor as well as to the rich, to the man of few opportunities as to the man of many, at the cost of hard toil and years of self-denial, the name and rank of a scholar."*[10]

University of London degrees were accessible to all, but entry was controlled by matriculation examinations – another innovation. Initially these covered classics, mathematics, natural philosophy and a science, with a wider curriculum from 1858, when candidates had to sit a gruelling 28 hours of exams over five days. Failure rates were high, reflecting the poor quality of much secondary education. However, in setting a widely recognised national standard, these exams were precursors to the examinations used at schools across the UK today. This more rigorous approach also prompted reform at the ancient universities of Oxford and Cambridge, where curriculums were expanded and examinations introduced at a similar time, though religious tests were slower to be removed.[11]

Like the 19th Century extensions of the voting franchise, wider access to higher education was initially restricted to men. Women could attend lectures at several institutions, including KCL, UCL and the London Mechanics Institute, but were unable to take University of London degrees. By 1850, Queen's College and Bedford College had been founded as women's colleges, and pressure was growing for change. From 1869, the University of London offered 'certificates of proficiency' for female students, the London School of Medicine for Women opened in 1874, and a new charter allowing women to receive UoL degrees was issued in 1878. That same year, UCL became coeducational, and two more colleges for women, Westfield and Royal Holloway, were opened the following decade. By 1900, women made up more than 30 per cent of University of London graduating students.[12]

In the space of 70 years, 19th Century London saw an unparalleled expansion of higher education, and a radical reformation of its

6 Harte, op cit, pp64-7
7 https://www.bbk.ac.uk/about-us/history
8 Kenyon Jones C, The People's University: 150 years of the University of London and its External Students, University of London 2008
9 Kenyon Jones, op cit p15
10 From 'The English People's University' in All The Year Round, July 1859, quoted by Kenyon Jones, op cit p20
11 Kenyon Jones, op cit, p17
12 Kenyon Jones, op cit p30

provision, with men – and eventually women – of all classes being provided with opportunities for technical and liberal education, set free from the material, curricular and religious constraints that had previously hampered access. At the end of the Century, London had the foundations of a higher education system that mirrored its status as a leading global city, and sought to meet the needs of a fast-growing population at a time of great economic change. In the words of Sean Glynn, "it could be argued that more was being done in terms of further and higher education for the majority of Londoners at the end of the Nineteenth Century than at the end of the Twentieth."[13]

This report reviews the impact of London's higher education system over time, on the city and the world, as well as the way that the city's system of higher education has responded to the changing policy environment. The next chapters explore:

- London's impact on the development of the modern university system and its continuing role as a global centre for higher education;
- The way that higher education in the capital has responded to civic initiative, and strengthened its economic and urban impact on the city;
- How the move to mass higher education from the 1960s affected the London model, and London universities' record in widening participation and enabling social mobility; and
- The quasi-market and outcome-focused model of higher education and 'lifelong learning' that has developed since the 1990s, and how London's institutions have responded to that.

In exploring this range of topics over this timescale, the report is necessarily selective, and based on secondary sources, and on valuable discussions events at a series of round table events held in early 2025. Its starting point is the University of London, who commissioned the research, though the institution's history only makes sense if understood as part of a broader system within the capital. The report also focuses on the civic, economic and social relationships of London's higher education system, rather than the long and knotty history of commissions, governance changes, mergers and disputes, and on general degrees and teaching, rather than research, medical schools and teacher training.

[13] Glynn, S, 'The establishment of higher education in London: a survey' in Floud and Glynn op cit p2

The report is complemented by a series of essays, reflecting on what London universities have done well in the past, and what lessons they could draw for the future:

- Diana Beech digs beneath the surface of London's positive record on extending access, to identify the groups and places that are still left behind, and the targeted programmes needed to support them.
- Angharad Eyre reviews London's pioneering extra-mural studies programme, and argues that lifelong learning opportunities need to be accompanied by childcare and other support that will make them genuinely accessible.
- Stephen Brown and Linda Amrane-Cooper look at the increasingly blurred line between distance and on-campus learning, and at the technological and pedagogical innovations that can optimise both.
- Ben Rogers examines the shifting relationship between universities and their cities, and how policy and practice point towards a revitalised relationship between London universities and civic authorities.
- Mark Hilton calls for more consistent engagement between London's universities and businesses, focusing not just on skills and innovation but also on broader issues of place and community.
- Sam Brenton examines the University of London's federal model and its long-standing commitment to flexible study, and the University's role in the renewed lifelong learning agenda.

2. National and global impact

"An university that gives, to the poor as well as to the rich, to the man of few opportunities as to the man of many, at the cost of hard toil and years of self-denial, the name and rank of a scholar."[14]

By the end of the 19th Century, University of London (UoL) was a national or even global institution. Students across the world were studying for its degrees, and much of the modern university system was developed under its aegis. This chapter explores how UoL opened its degrees to the world, how it supported the development of autonomous universities, and how this influence helped establish London as a higher education hub today.[16]

Global and national growth

Expansion followed quickly once the requirement to study at an affiliated institution was lifted in 1858. In 1861 two-thirds of successful BA students were studying in London, but by 1891 only a third were. Provincial centres for examinations were established to cater for this growth outside London, numbering three in 1871 and 95 by 1898. Fledgling universities across the country educated students for UoL degrees, before seeking royal charters to award degrees in their own right.[16]

The UoL model spread globally too. Even in the 1860s, matriculation and/or degree examinations were being held in Mauritius, Gibraltar and Canada. Tasmania, South Africa, India, Ceylon, Nigeria, Australia, the Malay States and the West Indies established examination centres in subsequent decades. By 1937, there were 79 overseas centres (mainly but not exclusively in British colonies) examining for University of London degrees.[17]

Towards the end of the Century, however, discontent with University of London's operating model, as a global examining body that did not itself teach a single student, grew. University College London (UCL) and King's College London (KCL) were at the forefront of a campaign arguing that London needed its own teaching university. UCL's Professor Karl Pearson complained: "London does not possess any university at all... To term the body which examines at Burlington House a University is a perversion of language."[18]

'Internal' and 'external' students, and ' special relations'

Two royal commissions were established, in 1888 and 1892, to consider options. Following a complicated legislative battle led by Richard Haldane (later Viscount Haldane, Secretary of State for War and Lord Chancellor) and Sidney Webb (founder of the London School of Economics (LSE) and chair of the London County Council Technical Education Board), UoL was reconstituted in 1900, with new premises at the Imperial Institute in South Kensington. UoL's new charter distinguished internal and external students, and established London colleges as 'schools' of the University, where the former would be taught. Alongside UCL and KCL, these included the women's colleges (Royal Holloway, Bedford and Westfield), ten medical schools, six theological colleges, the Royal College of Science and Central Technical College at South Kensington, and the LSE.[19]

A second category of London institutions were not schools of the University, but had 'recognised teachers' and offered UoL degrees to their students as 'internal' candidates (as well as giving them access in due course to University of London Union). Some of these were future members of UoL, such as Goldsmiths, Birkbeck, South-West Polytechnic Institute (which became part of KCL) and the Northampton Institute (later City University). Others, such as the Northern Polytechnic Institute, West Ham Technical Institute and City of London College, would be formally established as polytechnics in the 1960s, then as universities in 1992.[20]

Beyond these two groups, the 'external' examination system continued to form the benchmark for higher education across the UK and the British Empire. University colleges which offered University of London degrees until receiving their own royal charters in the early 20th Century included Birmingham, Sheffield, Bristol, Cardiff, Dundee, Newcastle, Nottingham and Reading; Victoria University, the parent institution of Manchester, Liverpool and Leeds universities, received a Royal Charter in 1880. Colleges continued to submit candidates for external examinations until the establishment of the Council for National Academic Awards in 1964, though many resented the 'most unequal partnership' this entailed.[21]

Alongside these fledgling universities was an ecosystem of correspondence colleges, providing teaching materials to students in the UK and overseas. One of the largest of these, the University Correspondence College (UCC), saw 40,000 of its students passing University of London examinations between 1887 and 1932, with a pass rate sometimes higher than that achieved by internal students.[22] However the correspondence college system was criticised for cramming ("teaching to the test" as we might say today) and for depriving students of social aspects of university education – a gap that UCC founder William Briggs sought to remedy by establishing sports and social clubs.

In some cases, the University of London took a more active role in incubating the establishment of new universities. As Britain decolonised following the Second World War, the University offered to enter into 'special relations' with any colonial institution that sought support in becoming a wholly independent university (generally alongside their countries' independence). Arrangements were flexible but included shared development of academic standards, course content and examinations, and combined boards of examiners.

The special relations programme ran from 1946 to 1970, and supported universities in Sudan, Ghana, Nigeria, Uganda, Kenya, Tanzania, Zimbabwe, Zambia and Malawi, as well as the University College of the West Indies, which had campuses in Jamaica and Trinidad.[23] A similar approach was adopted for some post-war universities in the UK: Southampton, Hull, Exeter and Leicester universities all maintained special relations with the University of London before their formal independence in the 1950s.[24]

The value of the external system remained a live topic through the 20th Century. The Haldane Commission, which reported in 1913, proposed running it down, but the Hilton Young Commission in 1926 (and subsequent legislation) re-affirmed its value.[25] As new universities found their feet in the UK and overseas, diminished demand for external degrees might have been expected. The opposite proved to be the case, placing as the 1963 Robbins Report notes, "a very heavy additional burden on many members of teaching staff and also upon the University administration".

The establishment of the Open University in 1969 offered an alternative route for remote learning, and resourcing problems and concerns about declining pass rates led to the suspension of the external system – for domestic and international students – from 1977.[26] But demand persisted, from overseas nations that were seeking to

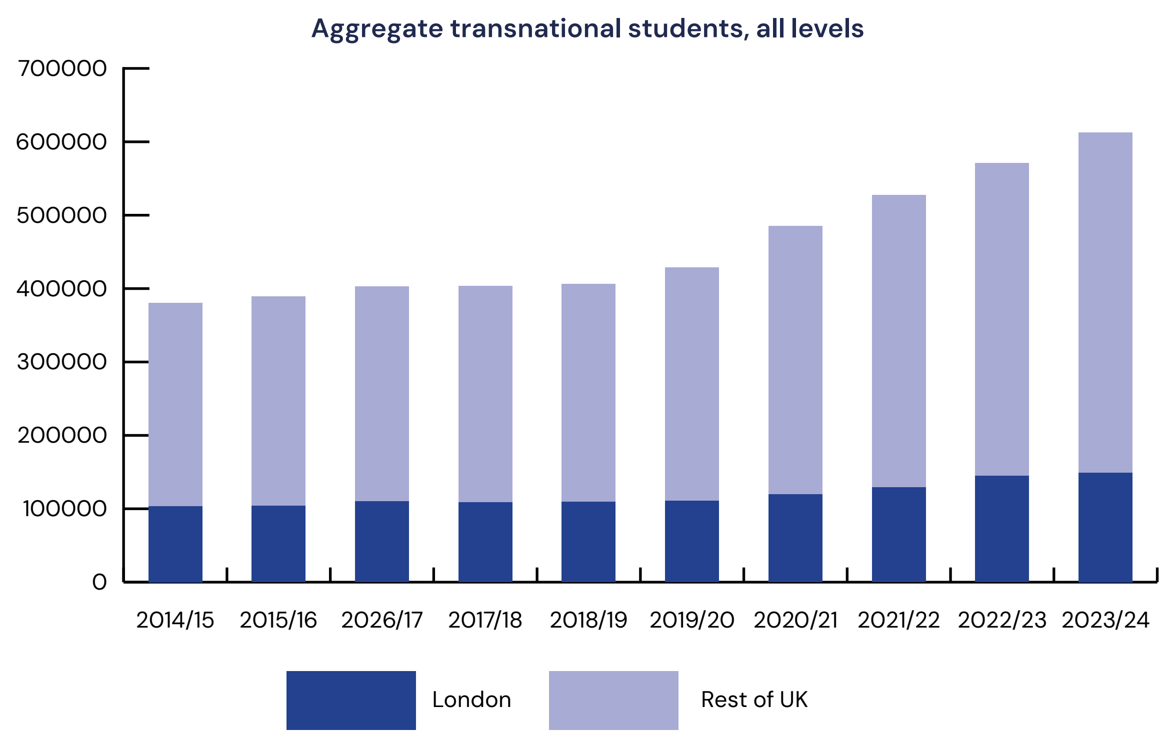
14 Kenyon Jones, op cit p20
15 Kenyon Jones, op cit pp56-7
16 Kenyon Jones, op cit p52
17 Harte, op cit p238
18 Harte, op cit p142
19 Harte, op cit p166
20 Harte, op cit p169
21 Pratt J, The Polytechnic Experiment 1965-1992, Open University Press 1997 p207
22 Kenyon Jones, op cit p164
23 Kenyon Jones, op cit p115
24 Kenyon Jones, op cit p66
25 Kenyon Jones, op cit p194
26 Kenyon Jones, op cit pp200-01

expand provision and "found in UoL a known and trusted entity", so the external programme was re-opened from 1984 and is now known as University of London Worldwide.[27] Today, UoL has around 39,000 online and distance students across the world, with 126 recognised teaching centres in 43 countries, including Singapore, Pakistan, Malaysia, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh.

Transnational and international students today

The capital's institutions educate more than 350,000 overseas students, up from 210,000 in 2014/15. Around 150,000 study remotely ("transnationally") from countries across the world (see Chart 1). University of London's distance learning programmes account for 39,000 of these (second only to the Open University's, which teaches 54,000 students). In addition, the universities of Greenwich, East London, Westminster, and Middlesex and London Metropolitan universities, each teach more than 10,000 transnational students. Transnational student numbers have grown gradually in London since 2014/15, though slightly more slowly than in the rest of the UK.

Chart 1 – transnational student numbers[28]



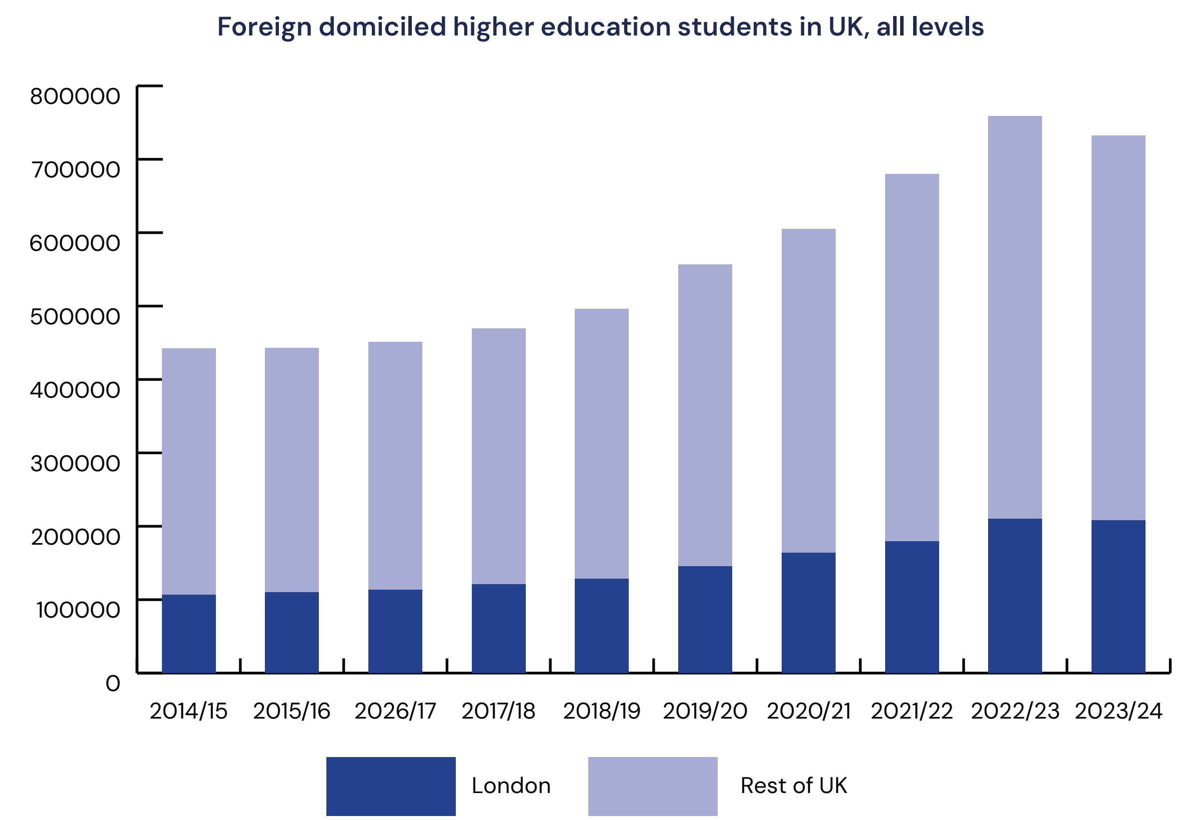
[27] Stiasny M and Davis M, 'Learning from over 150 years of distance education', in Amrane-Cooper L et al (eds) Online and Distance Education for a Connected World UCL Press, 2023

[28] Higher Education Statistics Authority (HESA), Table 21, April 2025. Oxford Brookes has been excluded owing to a change in reporting method from 2019/20.

Growth in offshore education has been paralleled by a growing number of international students coming to London to study. 208,000 students from overseas studied in London in 2023/24; 27,000 at UCL, 24,000 at BPP University, 15,000 at KCL, 12,000 at University of the Arts London, 12,000 at University of Greenwich and 11,000 at Imperial College. Numbers fell slightly in 2023/24, maybe in response to new visa restrictions announced in May 2023, but fell faster in the rest of the UK than in London.

In the longer term, growth has been particularly pronounced for students from India and China, who together numbered 18,000 in 2014/15 and 96,000 in 2023/24, while the number of European Union students in London fell by almost 45 per cent (from 44,000 to 24,000) between 2020/21 and 2023/24. The net economic impact of international students at London higher education institutions was estimated to be £12.5 billion in 2024/25.[29]

Chart 2 – international students in higher education in the UK[30]



[29] Greater London Authority, press release, 16 July 2025

[30] HESA, Table 28, April 2025.

London as a global higher education hub

London plays a global role as a higher education hub too. It has become a magnet both for international institutions opening a UK branch and for regional UK institutions establishing a global-facing presence. Among the better-known international universities with a London presence are Paris Dauphine University, and Boston, New York, Fordham, Richmond and Notre Dame universities (all USA) – each of which has London student bodies numbering in their hundreds. Many more global universities offer opportunities to study in London through partnerships with London institutions. London also hosts outposts of UK regional universities, with at least 15 institutions from every part of the UK having a presence in the capital.

London's leading role in the development of higher education across the world has helped to re-shape a city, which 200 years ago lacked a university of any kind, into a global leader in education, and also a global leader in its soft power and international profile. London regularly appears near the top of league tables, including the QS Best Student Cities rankings, where it performs well on measures relating to student mix, employability, and overall city experience, but is one of the worst performers on affordability.[31] 2024 research for London Higher argues that the UK's universities, and London's in particular, are central to the UK's soft power and influence across the world.[32]

The Covid-19 pandemic, more tense international relations and changing government policy have challenged the model of global travel for higher education, but London has built on its strong 'brand' and its unrivalled history of distance learning to adapt to changes. As policy-makers, students and academics continue to test out new models of teaching, learning, research and collaboration, this rich history of disruption and development could help shape the next phase of higher education's evolution.

The next chapter explores how London's higher education system has interacted with the city's civic, economic and physical development.

[31] QS, Best Student Cities, 2026

[32] De Souza D and Dixon E, Beyond Borders: exploring the soft power of London's universities, London Higher 2024

3. Civic, economic and urban impact

"To hold forth to all classes and denominations both in the United Kingdom and elsewhere… an encouragement for pursuing a regular and liberal course of education."[33]

By the end of World War II, the impact of higher education on London's physical form, economy and civic sphere was plain to see. At 210 feet tall, University of London's (UoL) Senate House was London's tallest secular building when it opened in 1937, occupying a Bloomsbury site just south of UCL. After the War, University of London Union, Birkbeck College, the School of Oriental and African Studies, and several institutes of the University moved in to this emerging cluster.[34] A little to the south, on either side of Aldwych, were King's College London (KCL) and the London School of Economics (LSE), which had doubled in size between the wars, leading its director Sir William Beveridge to talk of an "empire on which the concrete never set".[35]

To the west, the Imperial Institute in South Kensington (which had housed UoL from 1900 to 1937) was demolished in the 1950s to make way for Imperial College's expansion. Arguing that improved higher technical education was critical to increasing industrial productivity, the government proposed doubling student numbers at Imperial and allowed it a direct relationship with the University Grants Committee rather than one mediated by UoL. Demolishing the Imperial Institute, Negley Hart writes, was greeted with an outcry: "the Imperial Institute turned out to be admired by many who did not have to use it".

In other parts of the capital, the polytechnics founded in the late 19th Century also expanded fast in the first decades of the 20th Century, many simultaneously growing their degree programmes and their evening course provision: the People's Palace in Mile End was completed in 1937 and taken over by Queen Mary College in the 1950s; Regent Street Polytechnic was rebuilt in 1912 and extended in 1929; Borough Polytechnic Institute had expanded its Borough Road premises; and North West London Polytechnic opened in Kentish Town in 1929.[36] Higher education was expanding its reach across London, including into areas which were still characterised by extensive deprivation.

Intellectual improvement and economic mission

This growth in London's higher education institutions had its roots in decades of concern and agitation about the skills of the London workforce. From the 1851 Great Exhibition onwards, industrialists and philanthropists alike, including Queen Victoria's consort Prince Albert, came to believe that England was struggling to keep up with the industrial revolution it had unleashed upon the world.[37]

However, while UoL's 1836 Royal Charter presented the "promotion of useful knowledge" as one of its functions, this was generally expressed in general terms of "intellectual improvement" rather than of economic impact – despite the extensive training in medicine and law that took place under its auspices.[38] This contrasted with institutions such as the emerging polytechnics and mechanics' institutes, where practical application was emphasised from the outset: the generic mission ('charitable object') adopted by London's first polytechnics was "to promote the industrial skill, general knowledge, health and well-being of young men and women belonging to the poorer class."[39]

By the 1890s, when UoL's reconstitution as a teaching university was being discussed, its role in the city's and nation's economy was

[33] Statutes of University of London, 1900, quoted in Harte, op cit p 164

[34] Harte, op cit pp248ff

[35] Harte, op cit p251f

[36] Izbicki J, op cit p204

[37] Pratt J and Richards N, 'Higher education and the London economy 1830-1914' in Floud and Glynn op cit, p56

[38] Harte, op cit, p80

[39] Kershen A, 'Higher education in the London community', in Floud and Glynn op cit p90

given more consideration. In his autobiography, Richard Haldane wrote, "I showed [the House of Commons] how far we were behind Continental nations, and what a menace this was to our scientific and industrial prospects in days to come."[40] The reformed UoL included the promotion of research and the improvement of teaching among its aims, and in 1907 three schools merged to form Imperial College of Science and Technology, dedicated to "the most advanced training and research in various branches of science, especially in its application to industry."[41] Similarly, the prospectus for the London School of Economics, established in 1895 by Sidney Webb, pledged it to "the study and investigation of the concrete facts of industrial life, and the actual working of economic and political institutions".[42]

The 1900 reforms also formally established a board for 'extension' of UoL teaching – 'extra-mural' lectures and classes for students who did not intend to sit for undergraduate degrees – taking on the work previously undertaken by the London Society for the Extension of University Teaching. Over the years that followed, diplomas and certificates were introduced as well as provision for students who were unable to pay fees, with more than 1,200 free classes being provided at venues across London.[43] The UoL Extra-Mural Studies Department was passed to Birkbeck College in 1988, and integrated into the mainstream of the College 20 years later when government funding changes made it harder to attract funding for post graduate short courses.[44]

Civic engagement

As UoL grew, civic initiative was spurring the growth of London's polytechnic movement. As mentioned in Chapter 1, the ancient livery companies of the City of London, which had faced calls for reform, not least from William Gladstone and Prince Albert, had begun to play a role in technical education, both through individual initiative (e.g., the Goldsmiths at New Cross, the Drapers at the People's Palace and the Skinners at Northampton College), and through establishing the City and Guilds of London (C&GL) Institute for the Advancement of Technical Education. As well as founding its own institutes, in South Kensington and Finsbury, in 1879 C&GL began to oversee technical examinations.[45]

Calls for reform persisted, however. Following an investigation into the murky administration of charitable funds held by the livery companies and further commissions highlighting the need for technical education, City and Parochial Charities (CPC) funds saw their scope widened from the City of London to "the education of the poorer inhabitants of the metropolis". Funds were used on their own, or to match philanthropic donations for the foundations of polytechnics. Between 1891 and 1939, the CPC Foundation disbursed £2.7 million in grants, of which 75 per cent was spent on polytechnics and other education institutions. Recipients included Birkbeck, Northampton College, City of London College, Regent Street Polytechnic, the People's Palace, Borough Polytechnic Institute, Battersea Polytechnic Institute and South Western Polytechnic, each of which received annual grants that were equivalent to hundreds of thousands of pounds in today's prices.[46]

From 1893, metropolitan government became involved in the shape of the new London County Council (LCC) and its Technical Education Board (TEB), established and led by Sidney Webb. This was initially funded through 'Whisky Money', a special levy on beer and spirits originally intended to support impecunious publicans, but diverted to worthier causes such as technical education and rate relief. Webb and Quintin Hogg, founder of Regent Street Polytechnic,

[40] Quoted in Harte op cit, p157
[41] Harte op cit, p182
[42] Harte op cit, p171
[43] Kenyon Jones, op cit pp73f
[44] Brake L, 'In our Time: Adult Education and Birkbeck: Extra-Mural — An Experiment 1988–2009' in Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century, Issue 36 2024.
[45] Glynn, op cit pp122f
[46] Glynn, op cit p144

commissioned a report on technical education in the capital, led by Hubert Llewellyn Smith, who had supported Charles Booth's pioneering reports on poverty in London.[47]

The 'Report to the Special Committee on Technical Education', published in early 1893, took a broad view of technical education, defining it as "including the whole field of general education minus literature and ancient languages." It argued that a public authority should co-ordinate provision of such education, and that institutes should be supported across London to ensure accessibility to all and to reflect local economic specialities (for example, building trades south of the river). In keeping with its broad scope, the report also made the case for funding the University of London, to support the teaching of sciences and engineering. The TEB set up to implement the Committee's recommendations included members of the LCC, but also representatives of the London Schools Board, the City and Guilds of London Institute, the City Parochial Charities Foundation, the Trades Council, the National Union of Teachers, and major employers.[48]

The TEB allocated funding for individual scholarships and institutional grants, and used its financial resources to set and police standards in the provision of evening classes. Over its 11-year lifetime, £600,000 was allocated to polytechnics – the equivalent of nearly £100m today. The TEB founded the predecessors of Camberwell Art School and the Institute of Education. It also funded UoL, contributing around 25 per cent of revenue by 1902 (when the London Day Training College, later the Institute of Education, was established as a school of UoL) and receiving two seats on UoL's Senate in recognition of this.[49]

After LCC took on a formal role as London's education authority in 1904, it continued to fund further and higher education until its abolition in 1965, including through pledging £450,000 (£40m in today's money) to the construction of UoL's Bloomsbury campus. After 1945, the University Grants Committee (UGC) took on more responsibility for funding UoL and LCC's role diminished: UGC's share of UoL funding rose from 30 per cent in 1920 to 75 per cent in 1960.[50] Following LCC's abolition in 1965, the Inner London Education Authority continued to award grants and fund colleges, taking on responsibility for five polytechnics in inner London. By the time ILEA was abolished in 1990, however, local authority involvement in higher education was already being eroded.[51]

Alongside the postwar boom in higher education (discussed in the next chapter) came a gradual reappraisal of its purpose, and of the relative weights attached to national economic wellbeing, to personal fulfilment and to the disinterested pursuit of knowledge. Imperial College's expansion and the establishment of specialist colleges of advanced technology in the 1950s were an early recognition of this. The Robbins Committee's report also highlighted the economic importance of education:

> *"The growing realisation of this country's economic dependence upon the education of its population has led to much questioning of the adequacy of present arrangements. Unless higher education is speedily reformed, it is argued, there is little hope of this densely populated island maintaining an adequate position in the fiercely competitive world of the future."*[52]

The Committee identified "instruction in skills" as a fundamental but sometimes ignored aim of higher education, noting that career prospects might even be a motivation for students:

> *"We deceive ourselves if we claim that more than a small fraction of students in institutions*

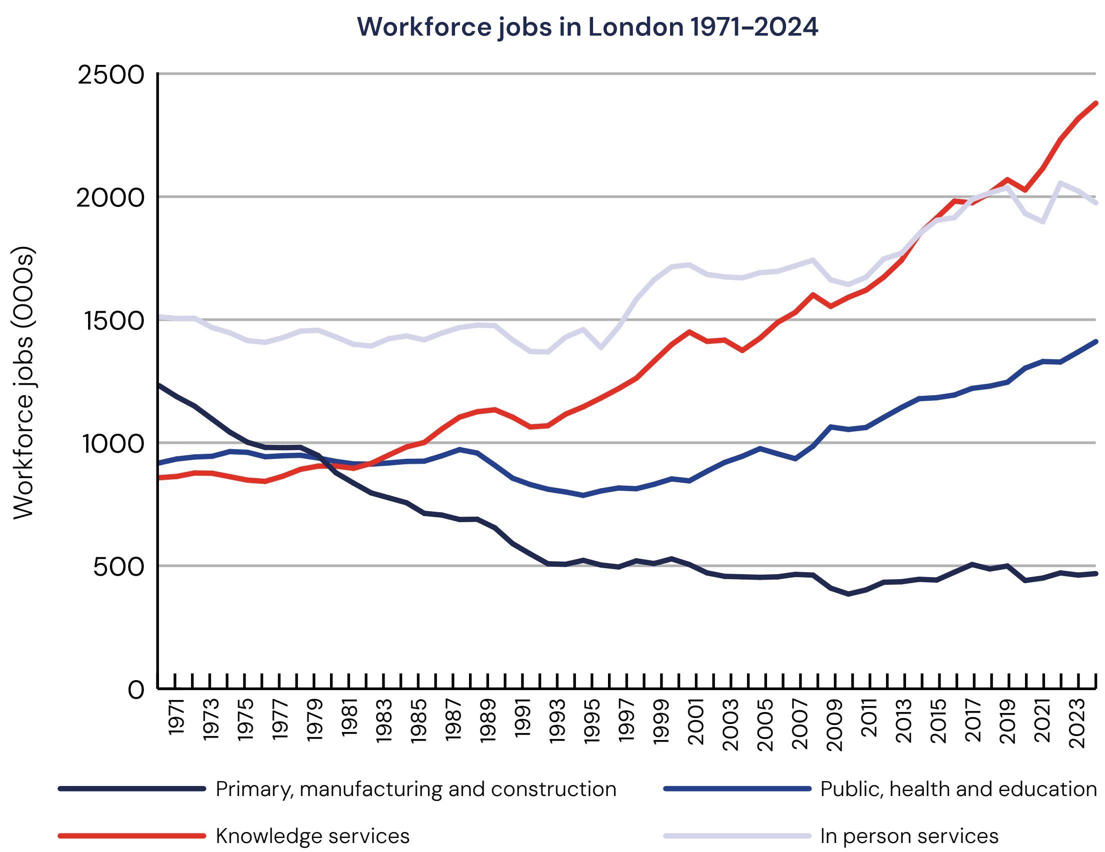
[47] Weeden B, 'The London County Council and higher education', in Floud and Glynn, op cit pp151-6
[48] Weeden, op cit pp162-5
[49] Weeden, op cit p169
[50] Harte, op cit, pp199, 222 and 254
[51] Weeden, op cit p177
[52] Committee on Higher Education, Report of the Committee appointed by the Prime Minister under the Chairmanship of Lord Robbins, HMSO 1963, Cmnd 2154 s16

of higher education would be where they are if there were no significance for their future careers in what they hear and read; and it is a mistake to suppose that there is anything discreditable in this."

London's economy and higher education today

The growth of higher education in London since the 1960s has gone hand-in-hand with the city's shift towards the knowledge economy (Chart 3 below), though even in the early 20th Century, commerce, finance and public administration were beginning to eclipse manufacturing.[53] Knowledge-intensive jobs (in sectors where 60 per cent or more of the workforce has higher education today) have nearly trebled in fifty years, while primary, manufacturing and construction jobs have fallen by two thirds.

Chart 3: Growth of knowledge intensive sectors in London[54]



The higher education sector itself has become a major employer within London. Around 82,000 people worked in tertiary education in London in 2022, representing about 1.5 per cent of workers – a similar number to those working in advertising, architecture and engineering, sports and recreation, or residential care. The number has increased steadily from around 50,000 in 1998, with a marked dip from 2006 to 2008 (Chart 4 below).[55] Not all these jobs are academic. Academic jobs numbered around 54,000 in 2023/24, of which half were in five institutions: UCL, KCL, Imperial, Queen Mary University of London and University of the Arts.[56]

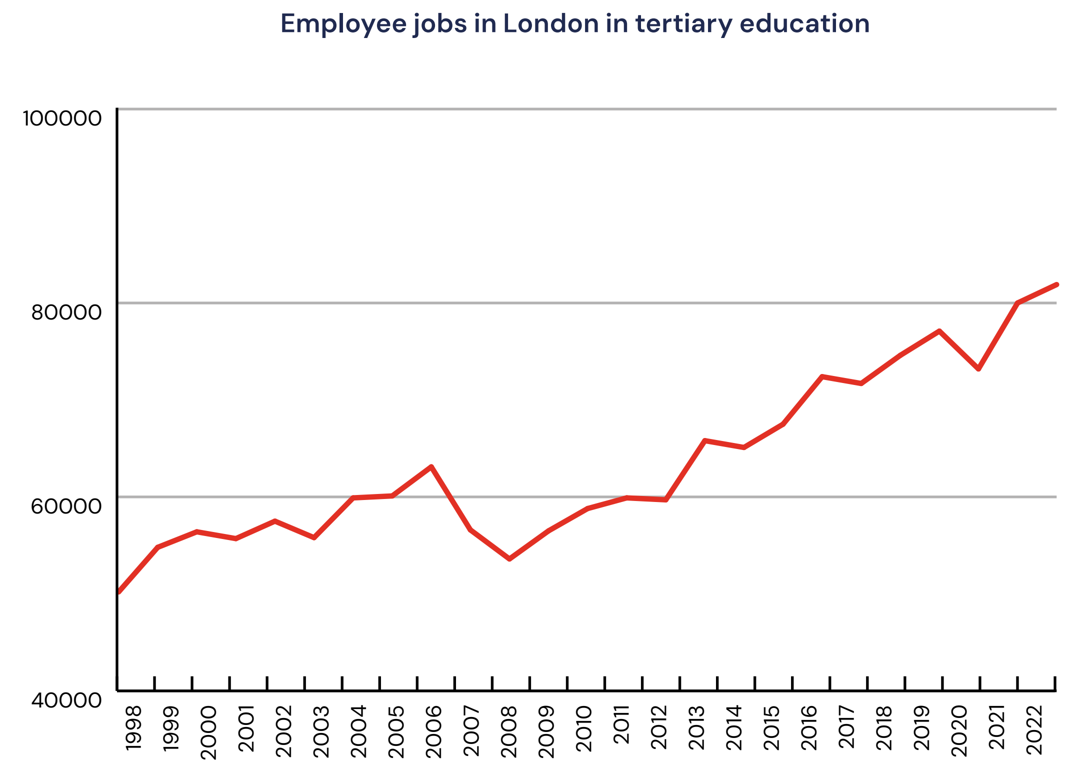
[53] Pratt and Richards, op cit p42

[54] GLA Economics, Employment projections for London by sector, 2022, supplemented by Workforce Jobs data for 2021-24, via NOMIS.

[55] GLA, More detailed jobs series, 2024.

[56] HESA, DT025 Table 22, 2025

Chart 4 – Employment in tertiary education



But direct jobs are only part of the story. A recent report for Universities UK estimated the overall impact of higher education in London accounted for 125,000 full-time equivalent jobs – around 2.6 per cent jobs in the capital, once impacts on other sectors such as government, health, hospitality and professional services were taken into account.[57] In terms of Gross Value Added (GVA), London higher education accounted for just under £15 billion in 2021/22, three per cent of a regional total of £487 billion.

London's universities are also a powerful engine for the capital's innovation and start-up ecosystem. UCL, Imperial and the Institute of Cancer Research were among the top ten UK universities for intellectual property (IP) income generating nearly £78 million in IP revenues in 2023/24. Imperial, UCL, KCL and Queen Mary were also in the UK top ten for filing patent applications.[58]

[57] London Economics, The impact of the higher education sector on the UK economy, August 2023

[58] HESA, DT032, Tables 4a and 4d, April 2025

Higher education as a city-shaper

Sir Charles Holden's original masterplan for Bloomsbury had been for a unitary development stretching from Montague Place to Torrington Place. World War II prevented completion, though Holden also designed the Warburg Institute's building on Torrington Place, completed in 1958. Revised Bloomsbury masterplans were drawn up by Sir Leslie Martin in the 1950s, but these were not realised, with the exception of Denys Lasdun's strikingly modern Institute of Education building, completed in the 1970s.[59] To the south LSE's open campus has seen significant and acclaimed redevelopment in recent years: Rogers Stirk Harbour + Partners' Centre Building, O'Donnell + Tuomey's SAW Building and Grafton Architects' Marshall Building have all won architectural awards.

London universities have a pioneering urban development: in the 1820s, UCL was mocked for choosing a site in swampy 'Stinkomalee',[60] and the cluster of institutions in South Kensington used the sites vacated by the Great Exhibition of 1851. Recent university expansions have continued this tradition. Universities have anchored 'innovation districts', which seek to harness university research to start-ups and business growth, and to bring research and innovation back from peripheral business parks to the heart of cities.[61]

The core Bloomsbury cluster (including UCL, Birkbeck and UoL) has now been joined by the Francis Crick Institute, the Alan Turing Institute and University of the Arts London (UAL Central St Martins) at King's Cross, where UAL became an anchor tenant for the regeneration of the former goods yards. These institutions are the heart of 'The Knowledge Quarter', an innovation and collaboration partnership that also includes corporates such as Google and Arup.

In east London, UCL has opened its Marshgate Lane Campus in Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park (QEOP), with UAL London College of Fashion, V&A East and Sadler's Wells joining the East Bank 'cultural quarter for innovation creativity and learning', with QEOP as a whole serving as an innovation testbed. On the other side of the city, Imperial College's White City Campus in west London (on another former Olympic and exhibition site) includes incubator space for new businesses that have raised more than £650 million and created 600+ jobs, including in leading tech, health and biotech sectors.[62]

This intensified engagement in London's economic life and its urban regeneration has formed part of a renewed focus on universities' civic role – on the impact they can have on the culture, society, economy, and the built and natural environment of their host cities. Civic initiatives within London include the London Research and Policy Partnership between University of London, the Greater London Authority and London Councils, which seeks to align research with the needs of policymakers in the capital. Other London institutions, from KCL, to Imperial, to City St George's have also put their civic role back at the heart of their mission.

London's university system was conceived in rowdy meetings in taverns, and for some years had a relatively low profile within the city of its birth. Civic engagement and awareness of the need for higher education unlocked new investment in the late 19th Century, and in the years that followed London's universities and colleges assumed an increasingly high profile in the city's development and its civic life. More recently, policy changes have reduced formal links between universities and municipal government, but London has seen a flowering of civic innovation, with universities at the forefront of regeneration projects, and rekindling their civic role to maximise their beneficial impact locally.

[59] Harte, op cit, pp 249 and 260

[60] https://www.ucl.ac.uk/ucl-east/beginnings-ucl-bloomsbury-some-parallels-ucl-east

[61] Hanna K, Spaces to think: innovation districts and the changing geography of London's economy, Centre for London 2016

[62] https://imperialincubator.com/

4. Mass higher education and social mobility

"Higher education should be available to all those who are qualified by ability and attainment to pursue them and who wish to do so…"[63]

Until the end of World War II, higher education remained the preserve of the elite; few others could afford it, and many professional jobs that would be seen as 'graduate jobs' today required connections more than qualifications. This all changed from the 1940s: as funding for higher education was extended to more students, and governments became more convinced of the economic need for a higher qualified population, wider participation was both enabled and encouraged. This chapter looks at the reforms of the 1960s, and their immediate and longer-term impact on London's higher education system, and at how London's universities are performing today in terms of enabling inclusive access, participation and graduate success.

The 1944 Education Act instituted universal access to free secondary education, and formalised local education authorities' role in giving grants to students; from 1962 local authorities were required to pay means-tested fees and maintenance grants.[64] In 1963, the Robbins Committee could already observe the impact of these changes: the proportion of 19-year-olds in full time education grew from two to seven per cent between 1938 and 1962. However, the share of young people qualified to go on to university grew even faster: the proportion of school leavers with the requisite A-level grades who actually went to university fell from 73 per cent in 1954 to 61 per cent in 1961.[65] Potential demand was outstripping supply.

The Robbins Committee rejected both elite and centrally-planned models for managing future demand, presenting higher education as a right: "we take it as an axiom that courses of higher education should be available to all those who are qualified by ability and attainment to pursue them and who wish to do so". The Committee's report envisaged overall full-time student numbers in Great Britain doubling, from 216,000 in 1962/63 to 558,000 in 1980/81.[66] To accommodate this growth, new universities should be established, colleges of advanced technology should be converted into technological universities, and other regional institutions should offer more advanced courses – some continuing to operate under local authority control, others being set on a pathway to university status.

Higher education growth in London

University of London (UoL) had seen growth as rapid as other universities, with numbers rising from fewer than 15,000 students in 1938/39 to 27,000 internal students in 1960/61, with a further 27,000 external students (see Table 1). As the Robbins Report noted, UoL had more students than any two other universities combined. But growth was under-resourced: in 1961, Sir Douglas Logan, who served as UoL's Principal from 1948-75, wrote: "there has been no dearth of ministerial pronouncements about the importance of extending the facilities for higher education, but when the crucial point is reached of providing universities with the necessary finance, there is an unfortunate difference between what is said and what is done."[67]

[63] Committee on Higher Education, op cit, s31

[64] Anderson R, University fees in historical perspective, History and Policy, February 2016

[65] Committee on Higher Education, op cit, ss41-43

[66] Committee on Higher Education, op cit s179

[67] Harte op cit pp255f

Table 1: UoL Student numbers[68]

	INTERNAL TOTAL	EXTERNAL
1902/03	2,004	
1913/14	4,950	
1920/21	8,099	
1938/39	14,587	
1960/61	26,762	26,953
1965/66	32,802	29,524
1970/71	39,629	33,359
1975/76	44,641	27,470
1980/81	53,909	20,353
1984/85	51,965	16,948

But UoL was no longer the only higher education provider in the capital: in 1962/63, London's four colleges of advanced technology (Battersea, Brunel, Chelsea and Northampton) had 4,050 full-time advanced students,[69] and in 1960 its 'regional' colleges of further education had a further 8,700 students on advanced courses (full-time, part-time and sandwich). There is overlap: some of these college students would have been studying for UoL degrees.[70]

Unitary systems and binary lines

The Robbins Report posed the question of whether the UK had a "system" of higher education and concluded that it did not.[71] However, by the early 1960s, it could be argued that London did. The University of London and London's colleges of further education were all part-funded by London County Council, who maintained a presence on the UoL Senate and in the governance of colleges. At degree level, all London students – whether in UoL schools, colleges with recognised teachers, or other institutions – took UoL degrees. And UoL itself had changed, absorbing Goldsmiths, Queen Mary, the City and Guilds Institute, and Birkbeck as new members whose roots had been in the technical education sector.

But was it good for colleges, or the students they were established to benefit, for them to become universities? In his history of the 'polytechnic experiment', John Pratt distinguishes between two very different educational traditions – the 'autonomous' tradition rooted in traditional ideas of universities as communities dedicated to the pursuit of knowledge, and the 'service' tradition that seeks to serve society both in teaching and research. Pratt defines the tendency of the latter to seek the former status, neglecting their service ethos, as 'academic drift'.[72] An example of this can be seen in East London, where the East London Technical College (later Queen Mary) was established in 1892 to "to promote the industrial skill, general knowledge, health and well-being of young men and women belonging to the poorer classes". By 1907, when East London College was admitted as a school of UoL, the mission had changed: "to promote higher education in East London in various branches of a liberal education for world quality students".[73]

As early as 1900, Sidney Webb and Quintin Hogg can be found on different sides of debates about whether elision or separation was preferable: the former was keen for the LSE to join UoL as soon as feasible; the latter feared that "University influence would destroy the original purpose" of colleges.[74] This was also the principal issue on which the new Secretary of State for Education, Anthony Crosland, diverged from the Robbins Report and its recommendations. Robbins had argued that regional colleges of further education should be seen as "providing the seedbed for some further growth of institutions to university status" as well as opportunities for experimentation with new types of course.[75] Speaking at Woolwich Polytechnic in 1965, Crosland presented the alternative view:

> *"The Government accepts [the] dual system as being fundamentally the right one, with each section making its own distinct contribution to the whole. We infinitely prefer it to the alternative concept of a unitary system, hierarchically arranged on the 'ladder' principle, with the Universities at the top and the other institutions down below. Such a system would be characterized by a continuous rat-race to reach the First or University Division, a constant pressure on those below to ape the Universities above, and a certain inevitable failure to achieve the diversity in higher education which contemporary society needs."*[76]

Crosland's decision formalised the 'binary line' between universities and polytechnics. Colleges of advanced technology (CATs) were to become universities, but other further education colleges would become polytechnics. In London four CATs became universities: Chelsea College of Science and Technology became a college within University of London in 1966, then merged with King's College London (KCL) in 1985; Battersea College of Technology acquired a site near Guildford and became the University of Surrey; Brunel College of Advanced Technology became Brunel University, operating campuses in Acton and Uxbridge (the former closed on 1971); and Northampton Polytechnic Institute was established as an independent City University (after some wrangling with University of London over its name), remaining in its Northampton Square premises. Other further education colleges became polytechnics: these included North East London, Woolwich, North London, City of London, Middlesex, South Bank, and Central London. By contrast with the autonomous universities, these would remain under local authority control.

University of London operations and governance

The changes had a significant effect on UoL's role. For more than 100 years, UoL had been the validating and examining authority for all degrees awarded in London and many outside, and since 1900 had established closer relationships with many London colleges through 'recognised teacher' arrangements. Now that link was broken: three of the four new universities in London would award their own degrees, polytechnic degrees would be validated by a new Council for National Academic Awards (CNAA), and from 1969 the rapid growth of the Open University added further competition to the 'external' degree system (leading to its temporary closure as discussed in Chapter 2).[77]

68 Harte op cit p269, and Cockburn J et al (eds), A History of the County of Middlesex: Volume 1, Physique, Archaeology, Domesday, Ecclesiastical Organization, the Jews, Religious Houses, Education of Working Classes To 1870, Private Education From Sixteenth Century, London 1969

69 Committee on Higher Education, op cit Table 13

70 Hansard, 26 March 1962.

71 Committee on Higher Education, op cit s18

72 Pratt J, The Polytechnic Experiment 1965-1992, Open University Press 1997, pp9f

73 Kershen, op cit p90

74 Glynn, op cit p32

75 Committee on Higher Education, summary s18

76 Crosland A, Speech at Woolwich Polytechnic, 27 April 1965

77 Negley Harte, op cit pp270-1

The Robbins Report also highlighted the anomalies of governance within UoL's federal model, which meant that "the vice-chancellor of a newly-founded university at once has access to the University Grants Committee and the right of membership of the Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals, while heads of long-established London colleges, each as large as a civic university of moderate size, have no such access or right of membership."[78]

Threatened with a further independent inquiry into its status, UoL canvassed its members. While most of the smaller institutions responded positively about the federal arrangements, KCL and University College London (UCL) were less satisfied. Noting that Imperial had direct access to the University Grants Committee (UGC), UCL asked for similar rights or at least to "play a greater part in the formulation of university policy." A compromise was reached whereby the schools of UoL had more autonomy over course content, student selection and the appointment and recognition of teachers.[79]

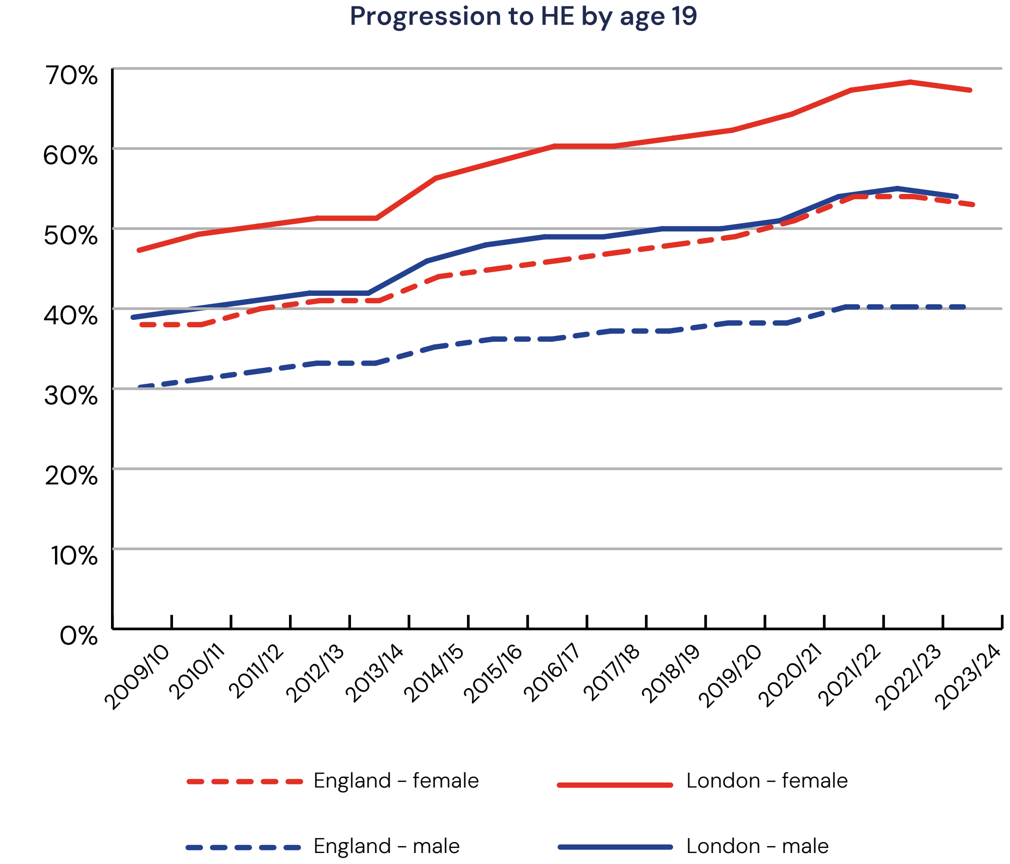
These changes marked the first in a sequence of commissions of inquiry into UoL's federal model, its operation and governance over ensuing decades. Some proposed strengthening the role of the federal centre (for example, the 1970 Murray Review recommended the appointment of a more powerful, full-time vice-chancellor), but the general tendency was towards increased devolution and autonomy. Colleges had direct access to the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) from 1993, and direct allocations of grant thereafter.[80] Centralised degree ceremonies ended in 1992, and Imperial, LSE, UCL and KCL all began awarding degrees in their own name in the early 21st Century, with Imperial fully separating from UoL in 2007. The 2018 University of London Act enabled individual colleges to seek university status in their own right. Most federal members have done so, while remaining part of the University of London federation, which City University and Brunel University joined in 2017 and 2024.

Widening participation and enabling social mobility

The Robbins projections for wider participation were met. By 1980/81, 535,000 students were in full-time higher education, compared with the projection of 558,000,[81] though this growth was concentrated in polytechnics. Participation shot up during the 1960s, doubling between 1962 and 1970, but then plateaued until the mid-1980s when it began to rise again. Participation initially rose fastest among people from professional, managerial and skilled backgrounds, and only took off for other socio-economic groups from 1980.[82] The gender mix at universities also reversed: in 1961/62, 75 per cent of students were men, while in 2011/12, only 46 per cent were.[83] Participation rates continued to rise until 2021/22, but with gaps widening between London and England as a whole, and between men and women (see Chart 5). Rates levelled off and then fell back in subsequent years; this may represent a return to trend after the extraordinary educational measures in place during the Covid-19 pandemic, or a longer-term inflection.[84]

[78] Committee on Higher Education, summary s685
[79] Harte, op cit pp263f
[80] Pritchard R, 'Has the federation a future? The case of the University of London.' In Oxford Review of Education, Mar 1995, Vol. 21 Issue 1, p47
[81] Callender C, 'Student numbers and funding: does Robbins add up?' in Higher Education Quarterly, Volume 68, No. 2, April 2014, pp 164–186
[82] Whitty G et al, 'Who you know, what you know and knowing the ropes: a review of evidence about access to higher education institutions in England' in Review of Education, Vol. 3, No. 1, February 2015, pp. 27–67

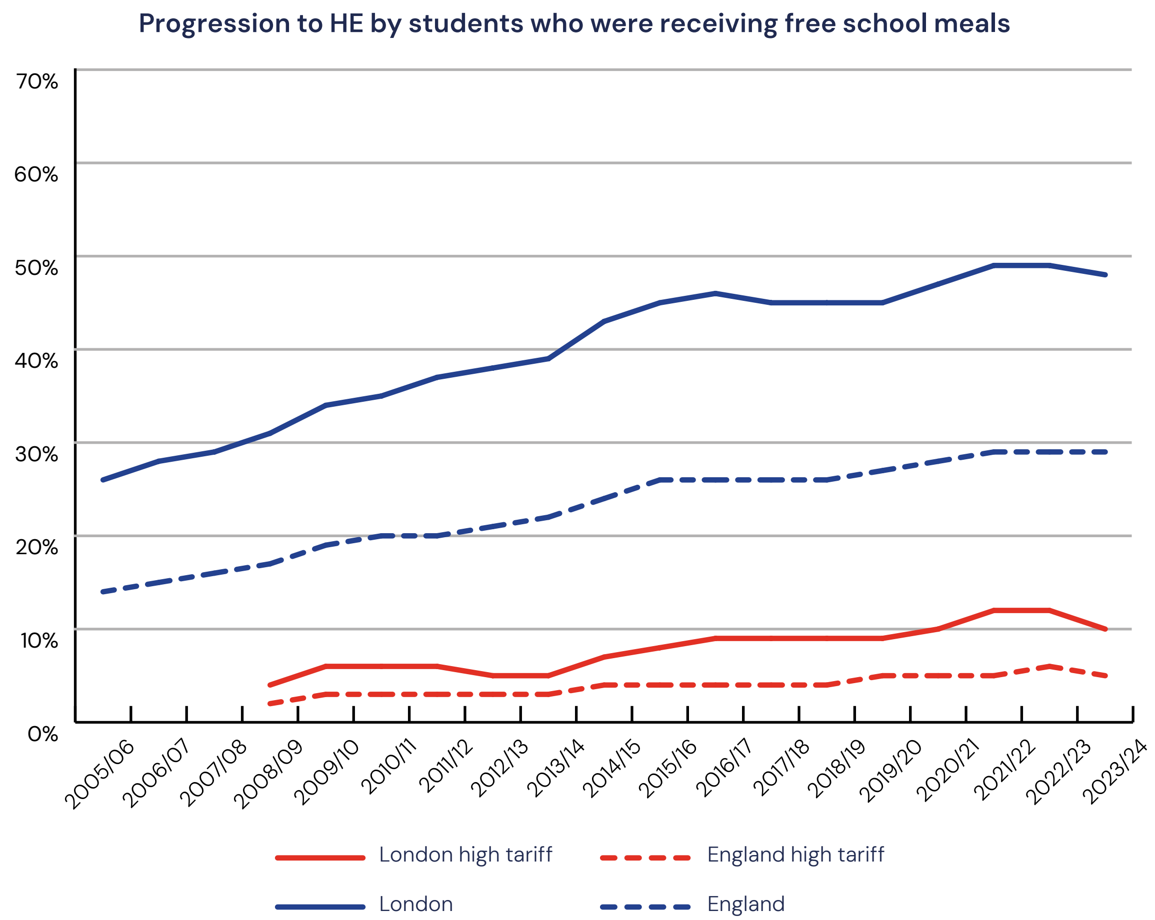
Chart 5: Progression to higher education by age 19, London and England



[83] Callender, op cit p176
[84] Department for Education, Widening Participation in Higher Education, 2025

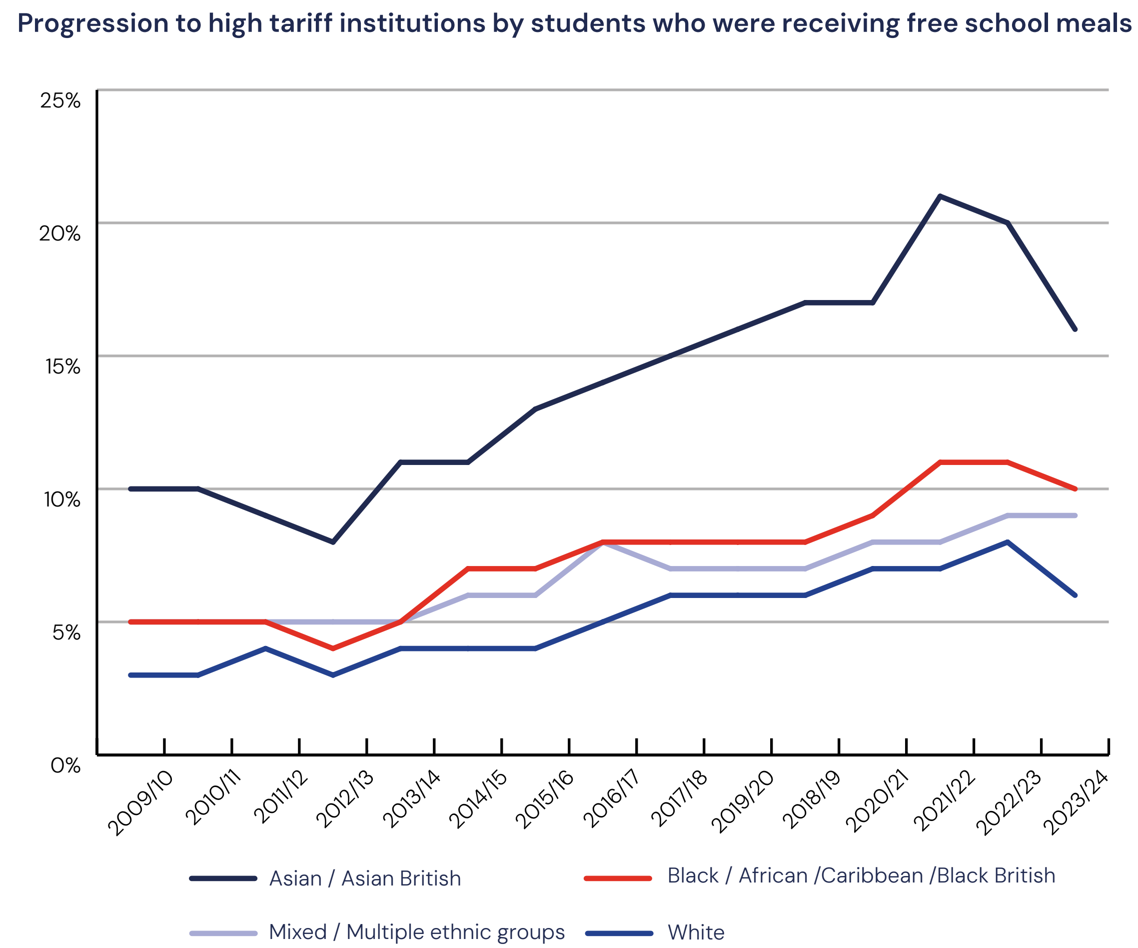
Progression rates for pupils who were on free school meals also indicate how much more inclusive universities have become to young people from poorer backgrounds. Overall progression for these young people rose from 14 per cent in 2005/06 to 29 per cent in 2023/24 across England, and from 26 to 48 per cent in London over the same period, with a similar pattern for admission to higher tariff institutions (see Chart 6).

Chart 6: Progression to higher education by children on free school meals



Looking at specific ethnic groups and at progression to the most demanding 'high tariff' institutions, progression for all groups increased sharply (see Chart 7) until 2021/22, indicating the strength of London's schools but also the aspirations of young Londoners. Within these broad categories, specific groups (e.g., children from Caribbean and Irish Traveller backgrounds) have particularly low progression rates, and boys generally underperform girls.[85]

Chart 7: progression to higher tariff institutions by children on free school meals by broad ethnic group

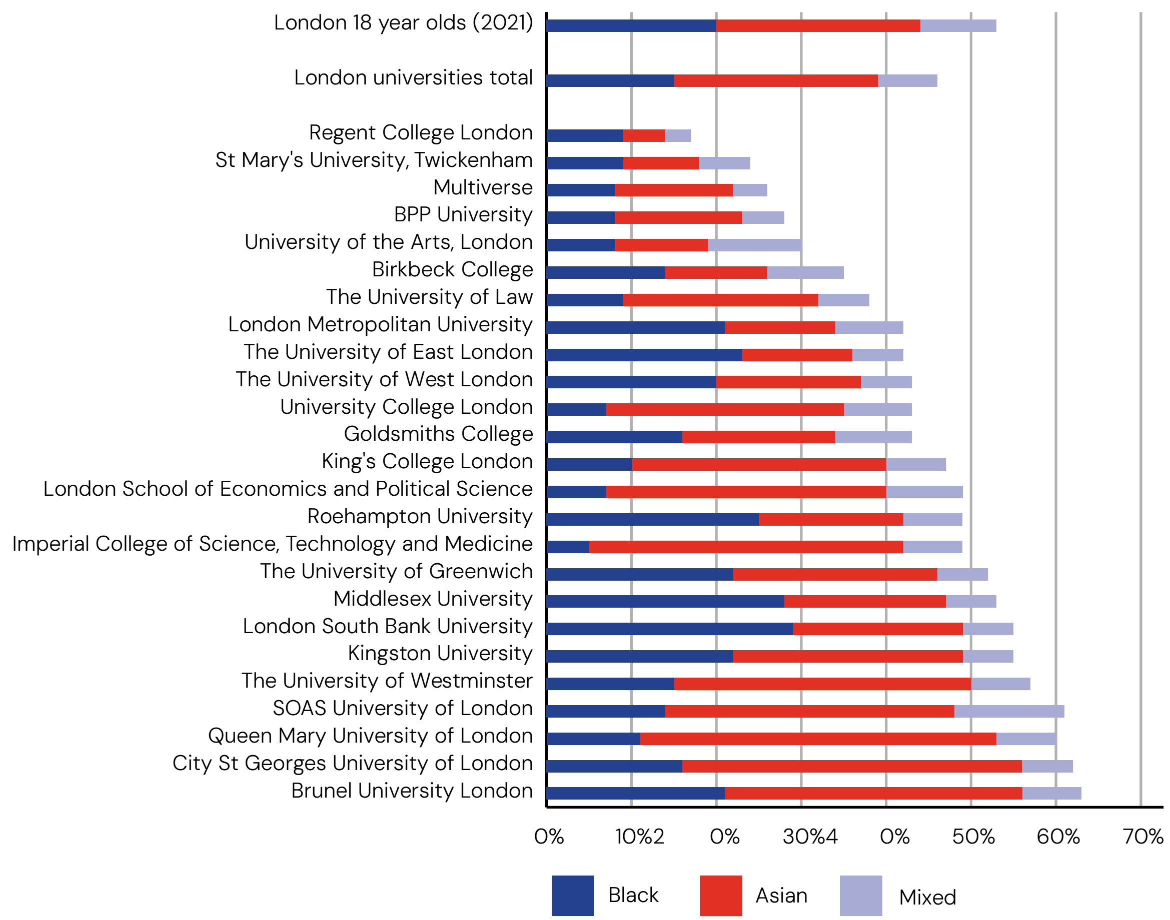


[85] Department for Education, Widening Participation in Higher Education, 2025

Other measures also show how universities in general, and London's in particular, have broadened their intake in recent years. London's universities have some of the most diverse student populations in the country (see Chart 8). In recent years, enrolment rates have improved particularly sharply in London for Asian students, who now have roughly the same representation as they do in the 18-year-old population, though White students continue to be over-represented and Black students under-represented.

Chart 8: Ethnic diversity in UK universities[86]

Non-white enrolments 2023/24, largest 25 London HEIs

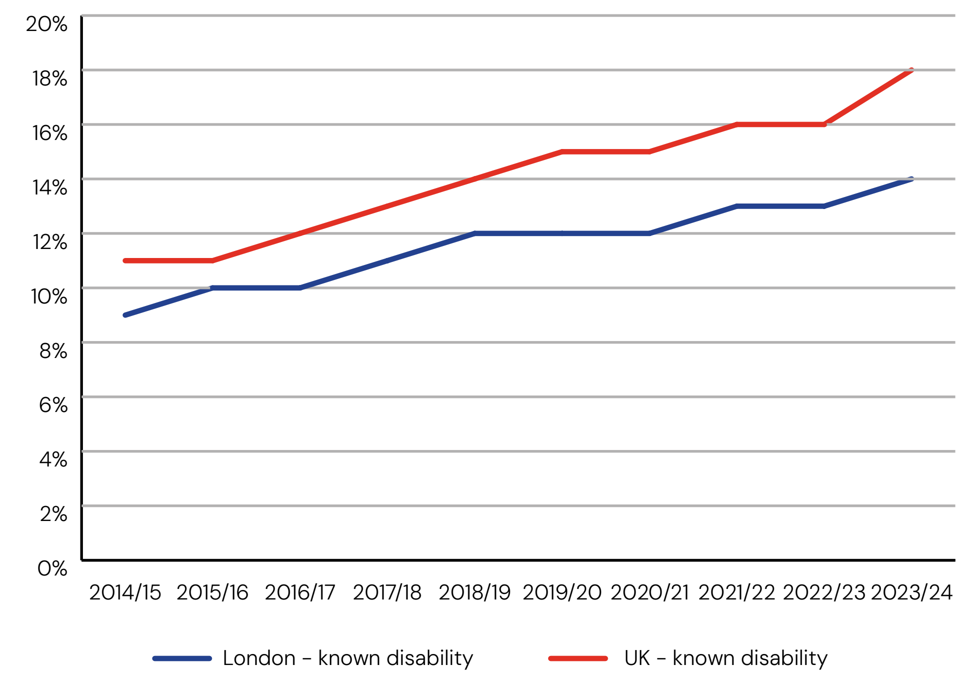


[86] HESA, DT051 Table 5, April 2025. Excludes institutions with fewer than 1,000 enrolments. Census data from 2021

Representation of disabled students has improved significantly in recent years (see Chart 9) and is slightly higher than in the population as a whole. In London, 14 per cent of students had a known disability in 2023/24 (compared to eight per cent in the 20-24 year old population), while across the UK the proportion was 18 per cent (compared to 13 per cent in the 20-24 year old population).[87] Historic statistics are limited, but the Dearing Report estimated that two to four per cent of students had a disability in 1995/96, compared to seven per cent of the 18-30 age group.[88]

Chart 9: Enrolments of students with a known disability, 2014/15-23/24

Enrolments of students with a known disability



[87] HESA, DT051 Table 4, April 2025 and 2021 Census

[88] National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education (NCIHE), Higher education in the Learning Society, HMSO 1997, s7.15

London universities are not only recruiting people from what have traditionally been disadvantaged backgrounds, but boosting their long-term prospects too. A long-term study of universities' impact on social mobility was undertaken by the Institute for Fiscal Studies and the Sutton Trust in 2021. It examined different institutions' achievements from two perspectives, based on the cohort who entered university between 2004 and 2006: the proportion of students recruited from poorer background (defined as having been eligible for free school meals at age 16), and the proportion of these who had entered the top 20 per cent of incomes by the age of 30. The product of these two is the mobility score. As Table 2 below shows, 17 of the 20 best-performing universities, and all the top ten, are in London.[89]

Table 2: Top-scoring universities in IFS/Sutton Trust social mobility index 2021

RANKING	NAME	ACCESS RATE	SUCCESS RATE	MOBILITY RATE
1	Queen Mary, University of London	16.1%	42.2%	6.8%
2	University of Westminster	22.5%	25.0%	5.6%
3	City, University of London	15%	35.1%	5.3%
4	University of Greenwich	20%	24.8%	5.0%
5	London South Bank University	25.7%	18.0%	4.6%
6	Brunel University	11.6%	37.5%	4.4%
7	St George's Hospital Medical School	10.4%	41.9%	4.4%
8	University of East London	29.5%	13.8%	4.1%
9	London Metropolitan University	24.6%	16.4%	4.0%
10	Kingston University	13.9%	28.9%	4.0%
11	Middlesex University	20.1%	19.1%	3.8%
12	Goldsmiths, University of London	13.9%	25.6%	3.6%
13	University of Bradford	20.3%	16.4%	3.3%
14	Aston University	10.4%	31.4%	3.3%
15	SOAS University of London	10.8%	28.7%	3.1%
16	University of Hertfordshire	10.4%	28.9%	3.0%
17	King's College London	5.9%	49.8%	2.9%
18	LSE	4.6%	61.1%	2.8%
19	University of West London	16.8%	14.5%	2.4%
20	Imperial College London	3.8%	60.3%	2.3%

[89] The Sutton Trust, Universities and Social Mobility, 2021

An alternative measure, which is updated annually, has been developed by London South Bank University's Vice Chancellor David Phoenix for the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI). It calculates a score based on universities' recruitment from the most deprived locations in England (as defined by the Index of Multiple Deprivation), these students' continuation on their course, and their achievement of positive outcomes after graduation (defined as high-skilled employment or further study). Though the latest index includes a salary weighting that depresses London universities' position, London universities made up seven of the top 20 (City St George's, LSE, KCL, Imperial, Queen Mary, Greenwich and UCL).[90]

Opening up opportunity has been a cornerstone of London's higher education system since its infancy 200 years ago, both in the foundation of the University of London as a prototype 'open university' and in the establishment of mechanics institutes and polytechnics. Successes today reflect London universities' continuing commitment to widening participation, but also the quality of secondary education in London and the aspirations of young Londoners (in a demanding labour market).

5. The quasi-market, employability and lifelong learning

"The expansion of higher education in the last ten years has contributed greatly to the creation of a learning society, that is, a society in which people in all walks of life recognise the need to continue in education and training throughout their working lives and who see learning as enhancing the quality of life throughout all its stages."[91]

The Dearing Report, commissioned in 1996 with bipartisan support and published soon after the 1997 general election, is probably best remembered for its advocacy of graduate contributions to the costs of higher education – an option that Lord Robbins had considered and discounted thirty years previously. However, while financial issues take up many of its 450-plus pages, the Report is keen to underline the centrality of its vision for a 'learning society'.

Coming at the end of a period of rapid expansion, the Dearing Report laid the philosophical and financial foundations that still support higher education today, even if these have become increasingly stressed. This chapter reviews this most recent phase of reform and expansion, and how it has affected universities in general and those in London in particular.

Coping with growth and Dearing's response

Student numbers grew gradually through the 1970s and early 1980s, but funding did not keep pace; public funding per student fell by 20 per cent between 1976 and 1988[92]. While most older universities responded to this by restricting their intake, many polytechnics had sought to grow by allowing the 'unit of resource' (cost per student) to fall. In 1988 the Education Act removed polytechnics from local authority control, giving them a similar status to universities – as autonomous, government-funded institutions. This change, along with active encouragement by then Secretary of State Kenneth Baker, led to accelerating growth: participation rates surged from 17 per cent in 1987 to 30 per cent in 1992[93], when polytechnics were allowed to seek university status, thereby erasing the 'binary line' drawn by Anthony Crosland in 1965.

[90] Phoenix D, 2024 English Social Mobility Index, HEPI 2024.
[91] NCIHE, op cit, s1.10
[92] NCIHE, op cit, s3.96
[93] Bathmaker A, 'The Expansion of Higher Education: A Consideration of Control, Funding and Quality' in Bartlett S and Burton D (eds) Education Studies. Essential Issues, Sage 2003, pp.169-189

Full-time student numbers rose from 600,000 in 1986 to 1.1 million in 1995, and real terms funding per student fell by a further 20 per cent.[94] As universities new and old struggled to meet demand, student number controls were introduced by government and talk of charging ad hoc top-up fees spread.[95] Against this backdrop, the Dearing Committee reviewed the purpose of universities, and what this meant for funding and administration.

In its emphasis on 'the learning society' the Committee's Report explicitly drew attention to the impact of global economic integration, the growth of service sector employment, and accelerating economic and social change. These trends would, it argued, place a premium on the acquisition of knowledge, on cutting edge research, but also on offering "opportunities for learning throughout life, to individuals and their corporations, so that they can have access to the most up-to-date processes and creative strategies."[96] Higher education was an economic good – for individuals and for society.

The Committee's projections assumed that growth would continue to 2015/16, with full time equivalent student numbers rising from 1.2 to 1.6 million. Even making bold assumptions about efficiency savings, they forecast an annual funding gap of £800 million (on a total annual cost of £2.1 billion) by 2015/16.[97] This could be plugged, the Committee argued, by seeking contributions from students towards the costs of their tuition, reflecting the 'return on investment' that a university education offered individuals.[98] The Report proposed a new 'compact' between students, their families, their employers and society at large, with contributions from each reflecting the benefits derived.

The Committee recommended that students' contribution should be approximately 25 per cent of the costs of tuition, paid either at the time of study or through an income-contingent loan; maintenance costs should continue to be funded through a (50:50) mixture of means-tested grant or parental contribution, and student loan. As well as striking the fairest balance between different interests, this would level the playing field between full- and part-time students, and "enable students to be more demanding of their institutions".[99] The world of higher education was meeting the world of market economics and consumer choice.

Fees, employability and tightening resources

As Higher Education Policy Institute's Nick Hillman has noted, the Dearing Report was unusual in that those recommendations that were implemented were brought in some years later.[100] Initially, a £1,000 flat rate contribution was introduced, with exemptions for low-income students, and the maintenance grant – which Dearing had argued should be retained – was phased out. From 2006, universities were allowed to charge up to £3,000 for fees (all universities charged the maximum), with students able to take out loans to cover these fees (as well as separate loans for living expenses). Following the 2010 Browne Review, the fees cap was raised to £9,000, with higher salary thresholds for when graduates start repaying loans and lower interest rates for graduates on lower salaries.[101]

The Dearing Report endorsed the improvements in intake rates of women, mature students, and people from less privileged socio-economic groups and ethnic minorities that had taken place since 1986, and argued that the Government should prioritise funding for those institutions that had a strategy for widening participation in place.[102] This proposal was eventually realised through the Office for Fair Access, set up in 2004, which required universities to put an 'access agreement' in place before they could charge up to the £3,000 cap; this function has now become part of the Office for Students, and 'access agreements' replaced by 'access and participation plans'.

Dearing had also proposed lifting the cap on student numbers, so that "informed student and employer demand should be the main determinants of the level of participation in the future". However, it was not until 2013 that the government, noting rising demand for skilled workers, a short-term drop in take-up as fees were raised to £9,000 and a long-term need for more places, lifted the cap on student numbers.

Universities' regional and local role received a whole chapter in the Dearing Report. It identified patchy engagement, particularly compared to universities in the USA and other nations, but highlighted potential. The report argued that universities could undertake a role in regional economic strategy, in attracting inward investment, in undertaking locally-focused research, in meeting labour market needs and providing lifelong learning, and in supporting cultural and community development. Dearing particularly recommended that universities should be represented on regional chambers and development agencies.[104]

The adoption of a quasi-market model for higher education (albeit a heavily regulated one with price controls) has been accompanied by increasing focus on outcomes and employability. The Dearing Report underlined the importance of engagement with employers, of students gaining transferable skills (communication, numeracy, information technology use and learning how to learn), and of work experience (though it cautioned against too much paid work interfering with studies).[105]

As previously explored in research for the University of London, the importance of such skills and experiences is widely recognised, though it is less clear how they can be made available to all both through classroom and extra-curricular experience.[106]

One approach is that taken by the University of London Careers Service, which provides direct careers services to UoL specialist institutions, as well as to distance-learning students and recent graduates. The Service has developed frameworks and resources to embed employability within the curriculum, ensuring it becomes an intrinsic part of teaching and learning. By embedding employability within the core learning experience, genuinely inclusive employability education can support lifelong success.

However, Dearing's vision of a learning society, and the "relationship which lasts for decades" between students and higher education, remains unfinished business.[107] Dearing wanted to level the playing field between full- and part-time study, to promote sub-degree higher education, and to see a consistent national framework for qualifications to enable students to take different pathways through the system. However, the model of a single full-time experience of higher education still seems to be the norm; there are fewer students studying non-degree qualifications,

[94] NCIHE, op cit, ss 3.4 and 3.96
[95] Birch R, What did Dearing ever do for us? Twenty years of the 'learning society', WonkHE July 2017
[96] NCIHE, op cit s4.14
[97] NCIHE, op cit s17.48
[98] NCIHE, op cit s18.13
[99] NCIHE, op cit s20.68
[100] Hillman N, 25 years on from the Dearing report, have we kept its spirit alive?, HEPI 5 November 2022
[101] Hubble S and Bolton P, Higher education tuition fees in England: briefing, House of Commons Library 2018
[102] NCIHE, op cit Chap 7
[103] NCIHE, op cit s6.46
[104] NCIHE, op cit Chap 12
[105] NCIHE, op cit s9.14ff
[106] Brown R, The AI Generation: how universities can prepare students for the changing world, Demos 2023
[107] NCIHE, op cit, s1.23
[108] UCAS press release, 17 July 2025

Table 3: Changing profile of study[109]

	1995/96 higher education students (UK)	2023/24 higher education students at HEIs (UK)	2023/24 higher education students at London HEIs
First degree	60%	65%	54%
Other undergrad	26%	5%	7%
Postgraduate	14%	29%	39%
Full-time	70%	84%	86%
Part-time	30%	16%	14%
Mature	58%	53%	
Younger	42%	47%	

more students studying full-time and fewer mature students than there were in 1995/96 (see Table 3). UCAS data on 2025 applications suggest that the number of mature applicants has continued to fall.

With that exception, the Dearing Report set the tone for higher education policy in the years that followed. In proposing a quasi-market model, it paved the way for the introduction of charging, for opening up higher education to new market entrants, and to strengthening regulation. Subsequent reports, such as the 2010 Browne Review[110] and the 2019 Augar Review[111] focused on adjusting the terms of this new settlement. The former recommended completely removing the cap on fees but raising the salary threshold for loan repayments, while the latter argued for a lower level of fees, increased teaching grants from government, reduced interest rates and lengthened terms for repaying student loans, and the reintroduction of maintenance grants.

While the features of university funding and governance have been broadly consistent for nearly thirty years, that does not mean that the situation is stable. On the contrary, universities have been waving red flags, as they find themselves squeezed by fees that have been fixed since 2017, by rising interest rates and by falling international student numbers. The next section reviews these challenges in the 2025 policy context, and considers what lessons might be drawn from London's higher education history.

109 ONCIHE, op cit charts 3.3 and 3.4; HESA SB265 Fig 4 and Fig 5. HESA DT051 Table 1; figures for full-time and part-time study exclude Open University; mature students defined as 21+ for undergraduate and 25+ for postgraduate

110 Independent review of higher education funding and student finance, Securing a sustainable future for higher education, October 2010

111 Independent panel report to the Review of Post-18 Education and Funding, May 2019, CP117

6. Rediscovering innovation at a time of crisis

This paper has set out a simplified and partial history of London's higher education system. It has traced the radical and secular roots of the capital's universities and colleges, the rapid expansion of the University of London to become a global institution and pioneer in distance learning, and the reforms at the beginning of the 20th Century that consolidated the University, built capacity in social and natural sciences, and formed new relations with colleges in London and emerging institutions across the world.

As the University of London built its iconic headquarters in Bloomsbury, proto-polytechnics were established across the city, supported by the London County Council. Higher education still makes its mark on the city, with campuses acting as catalysts for innovation, and boosting economic output and exports. London's universities also played a leading role in the 'massification' of higher education after World War II, growing their student bodies but also adapting governance to respond to changing circumstances, and have successfully widened access, and strengthened careers and employability support, as London's population diversified and its workplaces became more demanding.

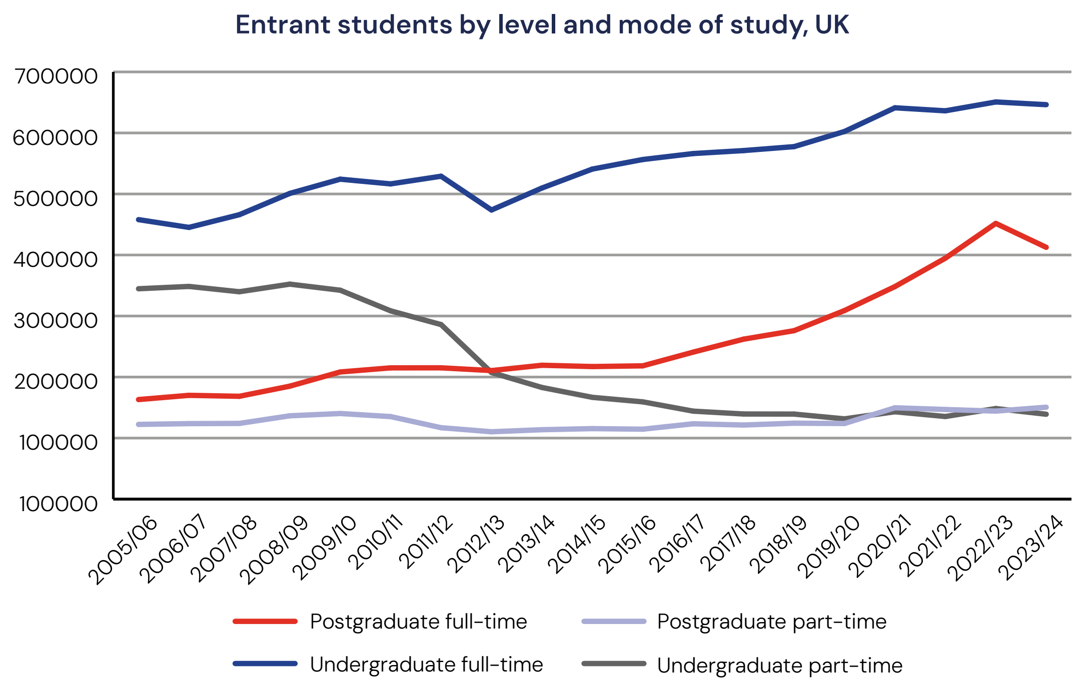
At the time of writing, however, London's and the UK's higher education system is facing a particularly testing set of challenges. Having fallen in the early 2010s, student numbers rose by 40 per cent over the ten years to 2022/23 (see Chart 10), though fell slightly in 2023/24, particularly for full-time postgraduates.[112] International student numbers also fell in 2023/24 (slightly more slowly in London than across England), following several years of growth;[113] tighter rules on family members joining overseas students, higher fees and more restricted graduate visas may result in numbers falling further in future years. Nonetheless, demographic trends suggest growth in domestic demand for places is likely to persist: UCAS forecasts that applications by UK-domiciled students could be 18 per cent higher in 2030 compared to 2022, and that London applicants could increase by 34 per cent.[114]

112 HESA, OC051 Chart 1 and Chart 2, April 2025

113 HESA, DT051 Table 28, April 2025

114 https://www.ucas.com/about-us/journey-million/what-journey-million

Chart 10: Students starting courses 2005/06 to 2023/24



Given the extent to which international student fees have cross-subsidised domestic students' education, the combination of falling international numbers and domestic student fees that have fallen by 25 per cent in real terms since 2012 is extremely challenging. Furthermore, many universities that borrowed to fund their expansion have been hit by higher interest rates in recent years. 45 per cent of English universities face a deficit in 2025/26, according to the Office for Students.[115]

Against this backdrop, the announcement of an increase in fees (the first since 2018) in autumn 2024 has been welcomed, as has the Government's commitment to future increases in line with inflation. But more rises in domestic fees will be controversial for students, who already leave university with significant debt, and some reports suggest that these levels of debt are already acting as a brake on ambition and career progression.[116] It is also notable that Londoners, who enter higher education in far higher numbers than young people in other regions, also have the lowest satisfaction with their jobs after graduation.[117] The personal 'return on investment' from higher education seems strained.

The Government's vision for higher education is presented in the Post-16 Education and Skills White Paper, published in October 2025.[118] This calls for a higher education system that is "aligned with the needs of the economy" – which collaborates more at a regional level on skills and innovation, which allows for more specialisation and collaboration (and merger), and which supports flexible provision of modular degrees and lifelong learning. The paper promises more financial stability, and pledges that a levy on international student fees will be used to fund maintenance grants for domestic students who need such support – if they are studying courses that further the Government's 'missions'.

The White Paper recognises the challenges facing higher education, but does not – and probably could not – entirely solve them. The risk is that higher education, a driver of domestic economic growth, major exporter and asset to the nation's global reputation, is damaged by bankruptcies, or by a more gradual and insidious decline in quality - in both teaching and research. At the same time, technological change, from hybrid learning to artificial intelligence, is changing how students learn, how they can be assessed, and the nature of skills that will be called for in the workplaces of the future.[119]

So, more radical thinking about the future shape, funding and delivery of higher education is required. Does the history of higher education in London offer any lessons? University of London's model of distance learning is world-leading, and enabled the University to adapt quickly to the challenges posed by the Covid-19 pandemic. It shows how the standard model of residential, three-year degree courses can be challenged. As technology becomes more and more embedded, it could offer London's universities the opportunity to extend their reach, offering more flexible models of learning, within the UK and internationally? This might include mixing AI tutoring with in-person support, balancing remote learning and team activities, and blending a mix of on- and off-campus provision.

London also has institutions that specialise in the model of lifelong learning that has been so keenly discussed (including in the 2025 White Paper) in recent decades. The University of London's external system (and in its time, the extra-mural system) has long helped students to juggle careers and learning, and evening classes offered by organisations from City and Guilds, to Birkbeck College, to the Bishopsgate Institute offer a reservoir of potential for flexible learning that has barely begun to be tapped. University of London's new programme of 'microcredentials', launched in January 2026, will bring together expertise from Federation members to offer short, flexible courses, credits of which can count towards a degree.

London's history also offers lessons relating to civic engagement. London's experience in the early 20th Century shows how a city can develop a higher education system that brings together institutions with differing remits and markets, metropolitan and local government, and employers, to think strategically about a city's needs. A renewed focus on civic engagement, which is in line with the emphasis on regional education and research systems in the White Paper, could help London and Londoners to maintain resilience at a time of significant disruption from technological change.

Finally, London has had success in engaging and securing good results for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. University education may not be appropriate for all young people, but there is no intrinsic reason why it should be more appropriate for middle-class children. Some of London's success in progression rates and social mobility measures results from the capital's diverse and aspirational population and from the quality of its secondary education system; but London's universities are also due some credit.

London's universities have been innovators and pioneers in widening access and excellence in higher education for 200 years. As the UK's higher education sector enters another period of change, there are lessons to be learnt in the sheer diversity of institutions involved, their willingness to think 'outside the quadrangle' of tradition, the links forged with city leaders, and the rapid development of different ways of teaching and learning to respond to the needs of citizens and society.

115 Office for Students, Financial Sustainability of Higher Education providers in England – November 2025 Update, November 2025

116 Otte J, 'I'd be better off if I hadn't been to uni': UK graduates tell of lives burdened by student loans, Guardian, 4 August 2024

117 Nathwani T, Should I stay or should I go? What the graduate voice tells us, Graduate Outcomes, 8 April 2022

118 HM Government, Post-16 Education and Skills, CP1412, October 2025

119 Brown, op cit

Responses

A Moving beyond the numbers: The reality of widening participation in London, by Professor Diana Beech, City St George's, University of London

London has long been a beacon for widening access to higher education in the UK. The capital's universities and higher education institutions are among the most diverse in the country, and young people from disadvantaged backgrounds in the region are significantly more likely to progress to higher education than their peers elsewhere.

Yet, while there is a good story to tell about access in London, it is not the full story. The headline figures can often mask glaring disparities between London's boroughs, or between its different socio-economic and ethnic groups. A future in which all Londoners can benefit fully from a higher education can only be achieved if we are prepared to look beyond the region's averages and confront the inequalities that persist beneath the surface.

London's visible successes

When it comes to opening up opportunities for higher education, London has a strong record of success. The capital leads the country in university participation rates, particularly among students from lower socio-economic backgrounds and ethnic minority populations. According to data from the Department for Education, over half of pupils eligible for free school meals at age 15 in inner London progressed to higher education by age 19 in 2023/24, compared to just 29 per cent nationally, and fewer than a fifth in the South West of England.[120]

London's universities also dominate national social mobility rankings, with large, multi-faculty institutions like City St George's University of London, London South Bank University and Queen Mary University of London consistently recognised for their transformational impact on the life chances of students from the most disadvantaged communities.

Multiple factors contribute to these achievements. While the capital's multicultural population is increasingly ambitious and aspirational, recent improvements to the region's state-run secondary education system have also led to London boasting the highest levels of pre-18 attainment in England. To encourage this diverse talent to flow through into higher education, London's universities have invested heavily in outreach, partnerships with local schools and targeted support for underrepresented communities.

The hidden story

London's headline successes nevertheless mask deep and persistent inequalities within the region. Participation rates still vary dramatically between boroughs, with young people in parts of outer London – such as Bromley, Havering and Lewisham – still far less likely to progress to university than those in inner-London areas. Moreover, these intra-regional disparities are expected to widen by 2035, creating a 'tale of two cities' between inner-London boroughs such as Westminster, which can expect an 80 per cent entry rate to higher education for free school meal-eligible pupils, and outer-London boroughs where only four in ten (or even fewer) of their peers are expected to progress to higher education.

These disparities often correlate with gender, ethnicity and class. Analysis by London Higher's AccessHE division shows how these different characteristics all impact on participation rates in the capital. For example, progression rates for white boys not receiving free school meals are almost twice as high for white boys who do. Asian boys receiving free school meals also have progression rates twice as high as their white counterparts, while almost three times as many Asian boys not receiving free school meals progress to higher education as white boys who do.[121]

These intra-regional anomalies matter for future policy. Without attention to detail, London's successes – especially when compared to other regions – can lead to assumptions that the capital has solved its access problem, and that political attentions should be shifted elsewhere. Intra-regional perspectives are therefore crucial to keeping London's access challenges at the top of the agenda and preventing yet more underrepresented groups from being left behind in the future.

From access to outcomes

Getting students through the door of London's many great higher education institutions is, however, only the first step in alleviating inequalities. The next challenge is ensuring that all students can thrive once they arrive, and that they leave university with the skills, qualifications and opportunities to succeed.

Here, the picture is also mixed for London. Research by the Social Market Foundation has found London has consistently had one of the highest rates of degree non-continuation among the English regions, with the 'drop-out' rate higher among Black and male students, as well as groups such as care-experienced students and disabled students.[122]

Attainment is another area of concern. Research by Universities UK into the 2017/18 cohort of graduates found that London displayed the largest attainment gap across the regions – standing at 15.6 per cent – between white graduates and those from Black and minority ethnic backgrounds.[123] Another study by the Social Market Foundation found that students with parents working in routine or manual occupations, from non-white ethnic groups and entering higher education with BTECs or vocational qualifications are all less likely to get a first-class degree.[124] These socio-economic factors also have an impact on graduate outcomes, with just over a quarter of graduates with parents working in routine or semi-routine occupations earning more than £25,000 per annum six months after graduation, compared to over a third of graduates with parents working in professional or managerial occupations.

The challenges of big city life can further heighten these disparities. The cost of living, the need for paid work alongside study, and the ongoing reliance on social networks for work experience in some industries can all contribute to unequal outcomes. While many universities offer excellent wraparound support services, these are not always accessible or well-signposted to those who need them the most.

A London plan?

To minimise future inequalities, London universities need a plan that focuses on the whole student journey – from pre-university outreach through to post-graduation careers. This means reframing widening participation as a whole-university priority, not just leaving it to the

120 DfT, Widening participation in higher education, July 2025

121 Boffey R and Raza K, Hyper-diversity revisited: London's student population in 2035, AccessHE/London Higher, 2025

122 Petrie K and Keohane N, Building on success: Increasing higher education retention in London, Social Market Foundation 2019

123 Universities UK/National Union of Students, Black, Asian and minority ethnic student attainment at UK universities: #CLOSINGTHEGAP, 2019

124 Petrie K, Graduate outcomes in London, SMF 2021

work of a single access department. It also means strengthening civic and employer partnerships across the region to support social mobility and local economic growth in London's most deprived and underrepresented areas.

While data can help institutions identify and address London's continuation, attainment and progression gaps, universities should listen to students themselves to understand their lived experiences and co-design solutions that work for London's evolving student body. The forthcoming Lifelong Learning Entitlement (LLE) could also provide an opportunity for London's universities to engage mature learners in higher education while upskilling and reskilling London's workforce to meet the needs of the modern tech-driven economy.

Nuanced policymaking

National policy perspectives must also evolve. Too often, London's seeming successes are used to justify a one-size-fits-all approach to access and funding or, worse, leave London out of the equation altogether. Yet, the capital's story is more complex. While it shows that progress is possible, sustained investment in outreach activities, appreciation of nuance and a deeper understanding of local and hyper-local contexts are required to go even further. When it comes to widening participation, policymakers must resist the temptation to treat London as a finished product and be prepared to listen to its struggles as well as its successes.

London's universities have been pioneers in widening access for nearly 200 years. Their next chapter must be about deepening this participation and ensuring that all students, irrespective of background and circumstance, do not just enter higher education, but flourish and succeed. London has the world-leading universities, the talent and the opportunity to lead the charge. Now it needs its policymakers to have the ambition to create a positive future for the capital and all its citizens.

B The University of London Extra-Mural Programme – lessons for lifelong learning by Dr Angharad Eyre, Senate House Library Researcher, University of London

Extra-mural education, which involves universities extending educational opportunity to those outside, often to more mature students, has been integral to University of London (UoL) from its earliest days. In the 20th Century, the extra-mural programme reflected UoL's sense of civic responsibility and its ability to work closely with London partners, as well as offering another way of extending access to university-level qualifications. This paper explores the evolution of the extra-mural programme, and identifies possible lessons for the future of higher education that is accessible to all.

History of London's Extra-Mural Service

UoL's involvement in extra-mural adult education dates back to 1858, when its supplemental charter enabled individuals to take exams following private study. There was no age restriction, and when the University opened examinations to women in 1868, many of those who took part were already adults, often working as schoolteachers, and prepared privately for the exams. Birkbeck had also been preparing working-class adults for UoL exams since 1858.

The University became more formally involved in 1902 when (in accordance with the 1898 University of London Act) it took over the function of the London Society for the Extension of University Teaching (which had been providing extra-mural adult university education since 1876). In 1909, UoL and the Workers Education Association (WEA) established a Joint Committee for the Promotion of the Higher Education of Working People, and the connection between the London branch of the WEA and UoL continued until the 1980s.[125]

In 1976, when the University celebrated the centenary of university adult education in London, the Extra-Mural Department was the largest service in the UK.[126] In 1980-81, part-time undergraduate and postgraduate registrations in London numbered 8,704, and constituted a third of all part-time students in English universities (excluding registrations at Birkbeck and Institute of Education).[127] In addition to providing a public service, the Extra-Mural Department was seen as benefitting the University by linking University members "as closely as possible with the interests of the general community within which they work".[128]

In 1988, the Department was merged into Birkbeck, where it became the Faculty of Continuing Education in 1999 and the Faculty of Lifelong Learning in 2007.[129] In 2009, in response to Government funding cuts – the withdrawal of funding for students studying for equivalent or lower level qualifications (ELQs) than they had previously attained – the faculty was closed. As a partial replacement, Birkbeck brought in its Lifelong Learning Guarantee of 2023, which provides their graduates with a discount on subsequent courses. The University of London Worldwide (distance and online learning) programmes also continue to provide some external access and pathways to university-level qualifications. However, the Lifelong Learning Entitlement introduced in 2025 has re-instated funding for ELQs – recognising their importance for economic growth through upskilling and re-training workers.

125 Piers Cain, 'Catalogue of the Archive of the Department of Extra-Mural Studies', University of London, 1982; Annual Report 1980-82, Department of Extra-Mural Studies, University of London, UoL EM 1/3/9.
126 'Brian Groombridge obituary', The Guardian, 13 July, 2015
127 Annual Report 1980-82, p. 8.
128 Michael J. Wise, 'Foreword', in Annual Report 1980-82, p. 1
129 '1988-89 Annual Report', Birkbeck College, University of London, Centre for Extra-Mural Studies, p. 2.

Pathways to University Education

Though the University's extra-mural provision saw liberal education as an end in itself, especially for older students who had missed out on university education, its provision increasingly focused on pathways to degrees and high-level vocational qualifications, especially in the field of healthcare. 'Taster' courses, run as traditional evening courses, were linked with the more intensive, centrally-delivered undergraduate courses, so that students could more easily navigate a pathway to a degree, with advice and counselling for their transition onto UoL degree courses.[130]

Further, London's development of diplomas that could secure entry onto degree courses can be seen as pioneering the accreditation of prior learning and credit transfer. Though UoL was behind other universities in recognising its own certificates and diplomas as meeting entry requirements, by 1980 these were "being recognised as providing advanced standing for adult students wishing to pursue degree courses".[131] In 1988 the Extra-Mural Department reflected on the success of this approach, in enabling flexibility and acceleration in pathways to degrees:

> *"In October 1988 the final degree results were announced for the second cohort of Extra-Mural nursing Diploma holders to undertake the one-year full-time course at King's College London, leading to the University's BSc Honours degree in Nursing Studies. Five students were placed in the upper division of the second class, and the sixth was awarded first class honours. […] This success justifies the decision made by the University in 1986 to permit holders of the Extra-Mural Nursing Diplomas to proceed to a first degree after only one year of further study."*[132]

Partnership working and funding

Working effectively with partners enabled University of London to support access for non-traditional university students, including those in deprived areas. The London branch of the WEA partnered with UoL to deliver tutorial classes in communities, and UoL worked closely with the Inner London Education Authority (ILEA) and outer London authorities to develop and deliver provision. For example, UoL worked with the London Borough of Ealing to develop a social care course in Southall aimed at 'unemployed/unqualified students of South Asian origin', which the majority of the students successfully used as a "stepping stone to social work training".[133]

The University also worked closely with Morley College in south London and with City Lit, delivering tutorial classes there, as well as jointly advertising in-service courses for adult educators. Specific courses were also developed in partnership with the NHS, the Met Police, the London Polytechnic (now University of Westminster), and the National Theatre. Local authorities were a major source of funding; even in the late 1980s they were able to fund students on social care courses.

Employers also acted as sponsors for employees, for example on the criminology certificate courses.[134]

The University used its strength as a federal institution, making use of the expertise and specialisms of federal members – especially in medicine and adult education. For example, London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine provided tutors for extra-mural courses in managing health systems.[135]

The Extra-Mural Department's eventual merger with Birkbeck reflected the increasing integration of adult extra-mural courses and degrees, as well as the desire for efficiency. However, the history of adult and extra-mural education is also one of continually reduced funding. From 1980 there was a push to make the Department self-financing, though many doubted that courses such as the social care diploma would ever achieve this. By 1990, students were often self-funding, for example for diplomas in adult education and counselling.[136]

Access and childcare

Most extra-mural classes, like Birkbeck's, took place on evenings and weekends, which enabled those with jobs to access education. This form of education was also suitable for women returning to study after having a family.[137] Meanwhile, the WEA often organised community-based tutorial classes in the daytime, enabling those without jobs, including parents of school-aged children, to access university education. WEA trade union conferences usually took place over weekends and provided childcare for any who needed it.[138]

Currently, the availability of affordable childcare is a barrier to participation for many parents. This reflects the bigger picture in the UK, where costs of childcare are increasing and provision is decreasing. A recent survey found only a third of councils reporting sufficient childcare for parents working full time, and Save the Children reported that the most deprived areas have 32 per cent fewer places than more affluent areas. Meanwhile, costs have increased by seven per cent (on average) since 2023, and are higher in inner-London than elsewhere.[139] While universities and colleges used to provide childcare – guidance from the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education to adult-learning providers in 2002 identified creche workers as an important source of support for adult learners – such provision is rare in universities today.[140] Within London, Birkbeck's nursery closed in 2020 and QMUL's followed in 2024. Though UCL's nursery is still open, fees are high and it is over-subscribed.[141]

In place of nurseries, Birkbeck offers a grant to single parents to cover the cost of childcare while attending classes either in person or online, and SOAS offers a special hardship grant to a limited number of student parents. LSE has partnered with three local nurseries and has, through subsidies, ensured a 15-25 per cent discount for staff and students.[142] Students may also be eligible for a childcare grant from the government to cover 85 per cent of childcare costs (in addition to the new 30 hours free childcare entitlement for children aged 3-4), however, eligibility criteria relating to income would likely exclude most students living in London.[143]

Even with distance learning, childcare requirements still represent a significant barrier to participation for large numbers of potential students. As Karlene Faith pointed out in 1988, though distance education provides opportunities for women it also "colludes with traditional gender roles and expectations by facilitating women's confinement to the home".[144] Face-to-face and group learning experiences are still valued by students, and parents of young children still require childcare to enable them to successfully complete their studies.

Conclusion

The history of London's extra-mural provision is one of increasing formalisation, including clearer accreditation and pathways to university education for those who might otherwise have missed out, or who needed to retrain and upskill. This was achieved through effective partnership working within the UoL federation, close

130 '1988-89 Annual Report', p. 5; Minutes of Extra-Mural Department, 2 June 1981, UoL EM 1/4/46.
131 Annual Report 1980-82, p. 7.
132 '1988-89 Annual Report', p. 8.
133 '1989-90 Annual Report', Birkbeck College, University of London, Centre for Extra-Mural Studies, p. 8.
134 '1988-89 Annual Report', p. 5.
135 '1989-90 Annual Report', p. 4
136 Annual Report 1980-82, pp. 8, 12; '1989-90 Annual Report', p. 2.
137 'Extension Staff Lecturers' Paper to Sub-Committee on the Russell Report', 29 October 1973, UoL EM 1/29.
138 Jane Thompson, Women, Class and Education, Taylor & Francis Group, 2000, ProQuest Ebook Central,. Thompson also refers to a creche (run by men) that was provided as part of the Women's Liberation conference at Ruskin College, Oxford in 1970.
139 Coram Family and Childcare, 20 March 2025
140 Mark Ravenhall et al., 'Involving Tutors and Support Staff in the Adult and Community Learning Quality Agenda', NIACE, 2002, p. 1.
141 'Queen Mary University of London's nursery shutting amidst protest', Roman Road LDN, 7 June 2024,; Jane Thompson refers to Southampton withdrawing creche facilities from the Women's Education Centre in 1989, suggesting that this has been a widespread trend over the last three decades.
142 See University websites for further information.
143 https://www.gov.uk/childcare-grant
144 Toward New Horizons for Women in Distance Education: International Perspectives, ed. Karlene Faith, (London: Routledge, 1988), p. ii.

collaboration with partners and government, and pioneering a flexible approach to recognising prior learning. In developing future strategy for lifelong learning, including micro-credentials, London institutions might want to reflect on how past success in this area was connected to an ability to make university study legible and accessible to students (from any background or at any phase of life) through strong partnerships with community-based educators and organisations.

massive corpus of knowledge about how to design, deliver and support effective distance education to be drawn upon by institutions wishing to take this challenge seriously.

C Distance and digital education: the new normal, by Professor Stephen Brown, Fellow at Centre for Online and Distance Education (CODE), University of London, and Dr Linda Amrane-Cooper, Director of CODE

Going mainstream

Since the late 1990s, on-campus students have increasingly been able to watch recorded lectures from their study bedrooms, read course materials online, and engage with peers, tutors, their assessments and feedback remotely.[145] Nevertheless, until recently, mandatory campus attendance remained the primary experience for most students at most universities, while distance education remained a separate route for a minority.

Covid-19 however, brought a rapid and significant pivot to remote education.

Globally, about two-thirds of higher education institutions (HEIs) moved to online teaching during the pandemic.[146] Regions with strong digital infrastructure in particular—such as North America, Australasia, most of Europe, and Asia—shifted teaching and assessment online rapidly.

The University of London's (UoL) experience exemplifies the scale of challenges even for experienced distance-learning providers. At the pandemic's onset, UoL supported 50,000 distance learners across 180 countries and 23 time zones. Traditionally, paper-based exams were held at over 600 verified centres worldwide. In January 2020, around 110,000 exams were scheduled and paid for when these centres began closing. UoL had only three months to design and implement an alternative.[147]

Post-Covid, the separation between traditional classroom-based higher education and digitally supported, online and distance education has blurred. But the challenges identified during Covid remain for students, staff, institutions, and indeed for nations seeking rapid expansion in their higher education capacity.

Key issues

1 How do we ensure that online learning is not seen as second class?

Traditional campus-based education can be excellent. It can also be less than good. The same is true of distance education. There are plenty of distance education success stories.[148] Meta studies of comparisons between online and face-to-face education have repeatedly shown no significant difference between them.[149]

What makes a difference is not the mode of delivery, but the quality of pedagogical design and delivery. Attention to educational design for effective online/distance learning is key to successful distance education. Staff development and training, plus specialist support units with expertise in distance education pedagogy, and technologies have an important role to play here.

Good progress is being made in some quarters: The findings from Jisc's 2024/25 Digital Experience Insights survey for students reveal that UK higher education students are positive about

145 Maguire D et al, Learning and teaching reimagined: A new dawn for higher education? Jisc 2020

146 Marinoni G et al, The Impact of COVID-19 on Higher Education Around the World. IAU Global Survey Report, International Association of Universities May 2020

147 Amrane-Cooper L et al (eds), Online and Distance Education for a Connected World. UCL Press 2023

148 Interestingly, in the USA distance education is concentrated among the top-rated institutions. The top 1.0% of all US universities enrol nearly a quarter of all distance students. (Seaman J and Allen I, Digital Learning Compass: Distance Education Enrolment Report 2017. Babson Survey Research Group)

149 See Shachar M and Neumann Y, Differences Between Traditional and Distance Education Academic Performances: A meta-analytic approach.
IRRODL 2003, Tallent-Runnels T et al, 'Teaching Courses Online: A Review of the Research' in The Review of Educational Research, Volume: 76 issue: 1, pages 93-135 Vallée, A et al, 'Blended Learning Compared to Traditional Learning in Medical Education: Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis' in Journal of Medical Internet Research 2020 Aug 10; 22(8):e16504, and Martin F et al, 'Examining research on the impact of distance and online learning: A second-order meta-analysis study' in Educational Research Review 36, June 2022.

digital learning: 86 per cent rated their digital learning environment as above average.[150]

However, challenges persist. Around 37 per cent of the students encountered difficulties in their learning because they lacked access to a suitable device and 60 per cent reported Wi-Fi connectivity issues. A 2025 Jisc survey of UK higher education students based outside the UK, including University of London learners, identified similar challenges, including issues with reliable electricity, internet and device access.[151]

2 How can distance learners get personal coaching, tutoring and learning support?

Two of the principal advantages of distance education are its flexibility and accessibility in terms of when, where, how often and at what speed students can access it. The Jisc 2024/25 Digital Experience Insights survey shows that students value these characteristics, particularly where high-quality content is provided through virtual learning environments.

However, research indicates that online students drop out more often than those in traditional classrooms, largely due to limited feedback and reduced social interaction. Providing opportunities for peer interactions can help to support engagement and learning, but managing these kinds of activities can be very labour intensive.[153]

A promising development is Generative AI (GenAI) which has recently been added into the distance education technology mix with dramatic effects.[154] Surveys report that many students are already using GenAI for a wide variety of purposes, including writing code, analysing data, drafting assignments, language translation, scheduling work, revision testing and summarising material.[155]

A UoL survey of student attitudes towards GenAI found a clear willingness to use the technology for feedback and support, but with some reservations:

"[GenAI is a] Very valuable tool and useful for e.g. formative feedback, and welcome increased use in this context, however this should not replace expert feedback and interaction."[156]

When effectively coupled with human input and expertise, and careful activity design, GenAI has considerable potential to provide learners with personalised, adaptive, 24/7 support, thus overcoming one of the major challenges for both traditional classroom-based and distance learning.

3 How can the integrity and rigour of assessments and, in particular, examinations be maintained?

Traditionally, assessment in higher education has been a largely manual and time-consuming process, often limited by scarce human resources, a teacher-centred approach to instruction and, in the case of examinations, availability of suitable premises.[157] Following the rapid move to online assessments during Covid, we now see a large-scale return to in-person examinations.[158] Online assessment presents particular challenges in terms of ensuring transparency, integrity, security and fairness, given the growing capabilities of GenAI tools.

The issue here is what kinds of exams are appropriate in an AI-enabled world? Do we want to check that our future doctors, lawyers, engineers, airline pilots etc. can merely remember important things? Or do we wish to ensure that they can actually apply that knowledge in challenging circumstances that mimic real-life situations? If mere recall is the goal, then conventional written examinations will continue to suffice, invigilated online if necessary. But if competence and workplace relevance is the aim, then more authentic assessment models will be required. Importantly, authentic and relevant assessment can be a driver for learning.[159]

GenAI offers compelling opportunities, from automated grading and personalised feedback, to creating dynamic assessment content and supporting adaptive and virtual learning environments that can assist with these challenges. When thoughtfully integrated, this technology can improve student knowledge and support information retention, while increasing efficiency, scalability, and accessibility.

4 How can universities protect their market position?

The phenomenal success of MOOCs (massive online open courses) is just one of many indicators of a growing market for short, flexibly scheduled, micro-credentialled courses. Commercial MOOC platforms and brands are a potential risk for universities offering traditional undergraduate and postgraduate taught degrees in a market where course fees are increasingly regarded as a barrier to study,[160] the value of a degree is increasingly questioned by learners[161] and employers are increasingly recruiting staff based on portfolios of work in addition to, or even instead of, formal educational qualifications.[162] These issues are particularly acute in some countries such as Nigeria where the supply of graduates greatly exceeds the availability of graduate level job.[163]

The level of involvement by universities in micro-credentials in the past few years is a sign that institutions are alert to this threat, but also to the flexibility that short, stackable, accredited online distance learning courses offer both institutions and learners, as well as their potential to respond more directly to student needs and to engage employers in co-design.

Therefore, while the significant expansion of online/distance education short courses, including from players like Google and Microsoft, presents challenges to established patterns of university education, the competitive advantage offered by the reputational value of institutions such as UoL should not be overlooked.

Strategic investment

Following on the heels of MOOCs, Covid-19 and GenAI developments, institutions are facing major new disruptions including the war in Ukraine and erratic, aggressive US foreign and economic policies that have further strained personal and national budgets and created a climate of uncertainty worldwide. Public and private funding for higher education is likely to be in short supply for the foreseeable future.

Successful institutional strategies will need to adapt to rapidly changing circumstances and learner preferences. The capability of Online and Distance Education to deliver technology-enhanced, flexible, low cost, trans-national education will ensure it plays an increasingly central role in higher education worldwide, not just at UoL.

150 Jisc data analytics, Student digital experience insights survey 2024/25: UK higher education (HE) survey findings, Jisc September 2025

151 Newman and Newall E, Global education and technology: insights into transnational student and staff digital experiences, Jisc October 2025

152 Majzoub I (2024). 'In-Person Versus Online Learning About Students' Perception' in International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science, 8(08) 2024, pp373-390

153 Patel D et al, Understanding Peer Review Practices in Online Degree Modules and MOOCs, CODE Project Report, 2025

154 Xia Q et al, 'A scoping review on how generative artificial intelligence transforms assessment in higher education' in International Journal of Educational Technology in Higher Education 21, 40, 2024

155 See Dixon E and de Souza D, London students' use of AI– a briefing note. London Higher 2024, Digital Education Council What Students Want: Key Results from DEC Global AI Student Survey, 2024, Fawns T et al, Gen AI and student perspectives of use and ambiguity: a multi-institutional study. Abstract from Annual Conference of the Australasian Society for Computers in Learning in Tertiary Education, 2024, Hirabayashi S et al, Harvard Undergraduate Survey on Generative AI An inaugural report commissioned by the Harvard Undergraduate Association, June 2024, and Brown S, AI in Learning student survey results, University of London/CODE, May 2025

156 Brown, op cit

157 Xia, op cit

158 Hatzipanagos S et al, 'Revolution, evolution, or regression – the transformation of assessments through times of pandemic and AI' in Ubiquity Proceedings 4(1), August 2024

159 Bunbury S, 'A case for challenging traditional assessments: a student-led workshop as an authentic approach to assessment in law and beyond' in Journal of Further and Higher Education, 49(9), pp1316–1333, 2025

160 Staton B, 'It's been a terrible year to graduate and find a job', Financial Times, 30 August 2025

161 Strauss D and Borrett A, Is the UK failing its graduates?, Financial Times, 12 May 2025

162 Hays plc, The rise of skills based hiring: Nearly half of employers don't consider a degree important according to new research, press release September 2023

163 Akinyele S, 'Nigeria's Brutal Job Market: Only 1% of Graduates Make It to the Interview Stage, 2025 Report Reveals', TELL Magazine, 2025

But as the mass pivot to distance education during Covid revealed, traditional classroom methods do not automatically translate into effective distance education. It will require careful and evidence-based high-level strategic planning and investment. Michael Barber and Saad Rizvi wrote in their 2013 'Incomplete Guide to delivering *learning outcomes*':

> *"The effects on the institution will be profound. University teachers will need training that is practical, continuous and inspirational, and teaching and learning materials will need to be constantly reviewed and updated. Capital programmes will need to ensure digital infrastructure is sufficiently prioritised. Libraries, which in many cases have already been wonderfully transformed, will need further transformation, as will all the many and varied learning spaces universities have invested in. All this means vice-chancellors, leadership teams and governing councils need to be at the forefront of thinking through what the digital revolution means and then act accordingly."*

Governments will need to address infrastructure accessibility as well. Fortunately, there is a massive corpus of knowledge about how to design, deliver and support effective distance education to be drawn upon by institutions wishing to take this challenge seriously.

D London universities and their civic role, by Professor Ben Rogers, Professor of Practice, University of London, and Distinguished Policy Fellow at LSE Cities.

Universities have long tended to view the cities where they are based with ambivalence.

On the one hand, there is a natural affinity between the two. Cities and universities tend to be outward-looking in spirit. They are both open to new ideas. And they depend on each other in more practical ways. Universities need city government to provide effective urban public goods – clean and safe streets, functioning utilities, transport, health and other public services, housing and a skilled workforce. And cities look to universities to provide jobs, taxes and new ideas, and to burnish the city's academic standing and soft power.

On the other hand, the two do not always get on. Universities pride themselves on being cosmopolitan organisations and can look down on what they see as the parochial horizons of city leaders and the pedestrian quality of municipal government. Cities complain about rowdy students, or the pressures that a growing university puts on infrastructure and services, including housing.

Of course, these tensions play out differently from place to place. My sense is that in Oxford and Cambridge relations between 'Town and Gown' have long been distant – a pattern reflected in, and encouraged by, the cloistered architecture of the colleges, as well as their long association with the Church and aristocracy.

London has always been a bit different. As Richard Brown's admirable short history suggests, the University of London was conceived, in opposition to Oxford and Cambridge, as a more worldly and civic institution and it had close ties with London government, business and civil society from the start. I was fascinated to learn that the LCC sat on the governing council of the University of London from 1900 to 1963, encouraging a close alignment between the two.

Where Oxbridge education was centred on classics, philosophy, and theology, UCL taught such new-fangled subjects as natural science, engineering, medicine and political economy, with London academics directing their expertise to London problems. LSE, founded by Sidney Webb and other Fabians in 1895 with a mission to help solve economic, social and political problems, has a particularly notable history of research and teaching on London – a history that very much continues to this day.

The founders of the University of London (UoL) wanted it to be less exclusive than Oxbridge – it was open to students of all faiths from the beginning and formally admitted women students as early as 1869. It was also more accessible to applicants from modest backgrounds, many of whom studied for its degrees through night classes and correspondence classes. In fact, some of the members of the UoL Federation, like Birkbeck, founded in 1823 as the London Mechanics' Institution, or City St George's, founded in 1894 as The Northampton Institute, had positively humble, artisanal beginnings.

Yet even in London, Town and Gown ambivalence has still been there. The city is a national and global capital, and its universities have reflected that in their student intake – the University began offering degrees by correspondence in 1858 – as well as their ethos and interests. For every one academic with an interest in London, there have hundreds with their minds elsewhere. Any formal links between the University of London and London government disappeared with the abolition of the LCC in 1965 and informal ones have arguably declined in the 50 years afterwards.

The City of London, both a local authority and a representative of the financial and business services sector, has assiduously cultivated its relations with London government, among other things hosting an annual 'London Government Dinner' at Mansion House. Developers and others from the built environment sector come together with the Mayor and the boroughs at regular real estate events in London but also at MIPIM in the south of France. Creative industries provide Mayors and borough leaders with endless photo-opportunities and enjoyable nights out.

But despite the massive importance of higher education to London's economy and society – students make up about 5 per cent of London's population - relations between and city government and universities can feel relatively weak. Government research funder UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) spends more than £1.5 billion in the capital, but London government has never shown much interest in how this is used; for the most part, relations between policymakers and researchers have been ad hoc and transactional.

Nonetheless, developments are moving in the right direction. Encouraged by initiatives like the Civic University Commission and the Civic University Network, higher education institutions have begun re-investing in their relations with their towns and cities. London's universities are no exception. Some, like Goldsmiths, have signed civic university agreements with their local boroughs. Some, like King's College London, have focused on supporting local student volunteering and engagement. Others, like University College London and Imperial, have worked closely with borough partners in expanding their campuses into poorer areas and employing local workers.

All have invested heavily in building relations with London schools and encouraging local young people to apply, and partly because of this, London has by far the best 'access' record of any English region. The success of research-intensive universities such as Queen Mary University of London and King's College London, both of whom have many London students from deprived families and deep roots into their local communities, show that there is no necessary trade-off between civic engagement and academic excellence.

At a collective level, London's universities have played a leading role in setting up and running the London Anchor's Institutions Network, which brings together all of London's major employers, landowners and investors to help meet London challenges. The London Research and Policy Partnership (LRaPP), jointly run by the University of London and the Greater London Authority, is working to promote more strategic and structured collaboration between London academic researchers and London government. Among other initiatives, LRaPP is supporting the GLA in publishing London's first 'Areas of Research Interest', giving academics a clear indication of what the Mayor sees as research priorities for the capital.

And there are promising opportunities ahead.

With the creation of a new level of devolved Mayoral regional authorities across most of England, the government has made clear (in the 2024 Devolution White Paper) that it expects to see closer working between UKRI, mayors and universities. Mayors will have a voice in the direction of research funding, and a bigger role in aligning academic research and regional business around regional challenges and growth sectors. And the Post-16 Education and Skills White Paper (2025) underlines the importance of civic universities and regional collaboration. While the size and complexity of London make it in some ways a special case, there is a clear opening for London government and universities to step up and develop a more mature partnership.

Likewise, the capital, long a leader in adult learning, is well positioned to make the most of the 'lifelong learning' agenda – indeed the University of London is already developing a scheme which will allow students to take courses across, and assemble micro-credentials, from different Federation members. Hopefully in due course this can be extended to other universities in London. These courses can be funded through the government's lifelong learning entitlements and while they will be open to students from across the UK, they are likely to appeal to local Londoners in particular. And there is a strong argument for using funding and other incentives to direct students to courses that help meet London's skills needs.

Finally, while universities tend to focus on widening access to their courses, they can also enhance access to employment and use their buying power to support smaller, community-based businesses. In fact, many universities, including the University of London itself, have started employing and training apprentices and applying 'Best Value' thinking rather than simply price considerations when buying goods and services. Yet there is more they can do – especially given the significant amounts of skills funding available through the government's Skills Levy and devolved adult skills budgets, and a more flexible procurement policy framework.

London's first universities were established alongside, and sometimes in response to, the flowering of civic government. Current arguments for devolution and a 'civic university agenda' reflect a growing understanding of universities' role as engines of regional growth and economic inclusion. London's universities, like universities everywhere, are under huge pressure. But they can build on recent progress, and keep strengthening their relations with London government, businesses and communities, both for their own good and that of the capital.

E Unlocking London's Potential: a new era for university-business collaboration, by Mark Hilton, Policy Delivery Director, BusinessLDN

London's universities are among the capital's greatest assets – global magnets for talent, engines of innovation, and anchors of local communities. They contribute over £27bn p.a. in economic impact, teach over half a million students and support more than 125,000 jobs.[164] But their full potential to drive inclusive growth, tackle city-wide challenges, and meet the evolving needs of business is still under-tapped. The opportunity now is to deepen collaboration between universities and business – not by reinventing the wheel, but by building on what works and scaling it with purpose.

Co-designing for Skills and Employability

London's higher education institutions produce over 140,000 skilled graduates each year,[165] many of whom go on to power the capital's economy. But with vacancy levels still running high and acute skills shortages across the capital's foundational and growth sectors, we need to go further. Embedding employability into the curriculum – through industry placements, real-world problem-solving, and alumni engagement – can ensure graduates are not only academically strong but business-ready. There are examples of good practice here, the challenge is to systematise the approach.

Business representative groups like BusinessLDN are well placed to act as convenors, helping universities understand evolving employer needs and supporting the co-design of courses that reflect the realities of the workplace. This doesn't mean compromising academic integrity. Rather, it's about building on technical skill development and enriching learning with practical insight, ensuring students develop the transferable skills – communication, critical thinking, adaptability – that employers value most.

Now is a good time to grip this, with government's focus on skills never stronger. BusinessLDN is proud to be leading the London Local Skills Improvement Plan (LSIP),[166] an ambitious plan to tackle employers' skills shortages, as well as address inequality and boost labour market inclusion in London. The LSIP outlines a blueprint for tackling the big challenges in London's labour market and better matching the supply of training and technical education with employer demand for new skills.

LSIPs, funded by the Department for Education (DfE), aim to bring employers, educators and other key stakeholders like the Greater London Authority (GLA) and boroughs together to transform the local skills system. Until now, their focus has largely been on further education, however, with the LSIP due to be refreshed in the Autumn, the DfE is keen to give greater emphasis to the higher-level skills that universities deliver – a welcome move.

At the same time, the GLA is developing a new Inclusive Talent Strategy for London, as a follow-up to the London Growth Plan. This will work with the LSIP to set out the type of system we need in the capital to deliver the skills employers need and support Londoners from all backgrounds into good jobs. Universities have an important role to play here.

Making Innovation Work for Business

London is a research powerhouse, with 47 per cent of its research rated 'world-leading'.[167] Yet many businesses, particularly small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), still struggle to navigate the university landscape. The solution lies in simplifying access – creating clear, business-friendly entry points, and showcasing success stories that demonstrate how collaboration drives productivity and growth.

Innovation clusters like the Knowledge Quarter around King's Cross show what's possible when universities, businesses, and local government work together. These ecosystems foster trust, accelerate roll-out and commercialisation, and attract investment. By scaling such models across the capital, we can turn London into a global exemplar of innovation-led growth.

A Shared Mission on Policy and Place

Universities are not just educators – they are civic, anchor institutions with deep roots in their communities. From training key workers to supporting local SMEs, their impact is felt far beyond the lecture hall. But in a city as complex as London, no single institution can tackle systemic challenges alone.

That's why collaboration on city-wide policy issues – from skills and sustainability to health and housing – is essential. Universities should come together to speak with one voice on the issues that matter, working alongside business and government to shape solutions. Initiatives like the Mayor's Anchor Institutions' Network and University of London's 'London Research and Policy Partnership', and representative bodies like London Higher, show the power of collective leadership.

A Smart Approach to Engagement

To make all this work, we need to rethink how universities and businesses engage. That means moving beyond ad hoc partnerships to more strategic, long-term relationships. It means recognising that universities are not just knowledge providers but co-creators of solutions. And it means ensuring that engagement is accessible, coordinated, and aligned with shared goals.

Business groups can play a vital role here - helping to broker relationships, amplify impact, and advocate for the value of higher education to London's economy and society. As one of the last remaining regional university groupings in the UK, London Higher is uniquely placed to lead this charge, working hand-in-hand with BusinessLDN, University of London and others.

A Call to Collaborate

The foundations are strong. The appetite is there. What's needed now is a renewed commitment – from both universities and business – to work together with ambition and clarity of purpose. By doing so, we can unlock the full potential of London's talent, ideas, and institutions – and ensure our city remains a global leader in inclusive, sustainable growth.

164 London Economics, The impact of the higher education sector on the UK economy, August 2023

165 https://londonhigher.ac.uk/london-higher-responds-to-the-spending-review/

166 https://www.businessldn.co.uk/what-we-do/people/the-london-local-skills-improvement-plan

167 https://londonhigher.ac.uk/our-work/research-and-innovation/

F The University of London federation: lifelong learning past and present, by Professor Sam Brenton, Professor of Practice in Lifelong Learning, University of London

Lifelong learning is moving from the margins to the mainstream of UK higher education policy. The forthcoming Lifelong Learning Entitlement (LLE) represents a reorientation of the relationship between learners, institutions, and the state. By enabling individuals to access funding for discrete units of learning across their lifetime, rather than only for full degrees undertaken at the start of adulthood, the LLE challenges long-standing assumptions about when, how, and why people participate in higher education.

This policy shift reflects growing concern about productivity, skills shortages, social mobility, and regional inequality, as well as the accelerating pace of technological and occupational change. For universities, it signals a move away from a predominantly linear model of education towards one that is modular, flexible, and responsive to changing learner needs.

The growing emphasis on lifelong learning is not confined to the UK, but forms part of a wider global shift in how higher education systems are responding to economic, technological, and demographic change. This has seen a growth around the world in, for example, microcredential frameworks, skills classifications, lifelong learning voucher schemes, and Government funding for the development of unbundled forms of provision.

At the heart of this renewed focus on lifelong learning lies a simple but profound recognition: higher education can no longer be understood as something completed before working life begins. In economies characterised by rapid technological change, longer working lives, and shifting patterns of employment, initial qualification is increasingly just the starting point. Professionals are expected to update skills, acquire new knowledge, and sometimes retrain multiple times over the course of their careers. At the same time, individuals are seeking education not only for economic advancement, but for personal development, civic engagement, and adaptability in uncertain times.

Traditional models of higher education, built around full-time, campus-based study for young adults, struggle to accommodate these realities. Lifelong learning reframes higher education as an ongoing relationship between learner and institution (and indeed between and across different providers), rather than a one-off transaction. It emphasises flexibility of pace, mode, and entry point, and recognises that learners may move in and out of formal education as their circumstances change. In doing so, it challenges universities to rethink curriculum design, delivery models, and student support in ways that better align with contemporary lives and careers.

As this report has shown, the University of London federation has a long history of delivering accessible, affordable, and flexible higher education at scale. Through the External System, established in the nineteenth century, and through its subsequent incarnations, the University has enabled students around the world to study for London degrees at a pace that suits them, without relocating to the capital or attending a constituent college in person. The External System evolved over time, but in its current incarnation as the University of London Worldwide, its core principles remain consistent: access, flexibility, academic rigour, multi-provider delivery (through its constituent colleges, now 'federation members'), and global reach.

In many respects, the External System and its successor entities anticipated contemporary debates about lifelong learning, online provision, and flexible study by well over a century. Its success demonstrates that large-scale, high-quality lifelong learning is not only theoretically desirable, but practically achievable when supported by appropriate institutional structures.

As a result of this history of innovation, the University of London today finds itself well placed to respond to today's renewed focus on lifelong learning. Unlike many universities whose structures, cultures, and business models are tightly bound to campus-based provision, the University's federal model and long experience of external and distance education have embedded flexibility into its organisational purpose and structures.

The looser relationship between teaching, assessment, and award-granting that characterised the External System has created enduring capabilities at the University of London in curriculum standard-setting, quality assurance, and partnership working. At a moment when the sector is being asked to unbundle provision, recognise smaller units of learning, and support diverse learner journeys, these capabilities are once again highly relevant. What might appear as a historical anomaly in a sector dominated by residential universities now represents a strategic advantage. The University's global outlook, its experience of operating at scale, and its comfort with supporting a diverse, non-traditional student body position it to act not merely as an adopter of lifelong learning policy, but as a shaper of emerging practice.

'Lifelong learning' is not a new idea:

- it is mentioned 79 times in the 1997 Dearing Report;[168]
- the Fryer Report (also 1997) stated: "We want to see a national Credit Accumulation and Transfer system [...] so that people can build up blocks of qualifications over time and know what particular blocks of learning are worth";[169]
- the Augar Review (2019) – where a lifelong learning entitlement was first proposed – replayed some of the same themes, notably the recommendation that exit awards should be discrete awards in their own right.[170]

So when the UK government, upon publishing its Post-16 Education and Skills White Paper (2025), asserted that...

> *"Education doesn't stop at 18 or 21. The new Lifelong Learning Entitlement (LLE) will make it easier for people to learn, retrain or upskill at any stage of life.*
>
> *"Learners will be able to move between universities, colleges and training providers, building up qualifications over time rather than needing to complete a full degree in one go.*
>
> *"The government is also looking at ways to introduce "break points" within degrees, allowing students to gain recognised qualifications as they progress — and return later to complete their studies if they choose.*[171]

... it was not proposing a new idea. Rather, these are themes which have been in tension with traditional university approaches for decades – tensions that have not yet been resolved.

Strikingly, many of today's policy aspirations for lifelong learning echo the founding mission of the University of London itself, and its practice since.

168 National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education (NCIHE), Higher education in the Learning Society, HMSO 1997

169 Fryer R, Learning for the Twenty-First Century: first report of the Advisory Group for Continuing Education and Lifelong Learning, 1997

170 Independent panel report to the Review of Post-18 Education and Funding, DfE, May 2019

171 https://educationhub.blog.gov.uk/2025/10/everything-you-need-to-know-about-the-new-higher-education-reforms/

Established in 1836, the University was conceived as an examining and degree-awarding body that would extend access to higher education beyond the narrow confines of elite, residential institutions. Its early commitment to openness, secularism, and merit-based assessment challenged prevailing norms and sought to make university education available to those excluded by geography, religion, or social background. Contemporary policy language around flexibility, accessibility, and opportunity bears a remarkable resemblance to these original ambitions, which led the University to be described by Charles Dickens' magazine All The Year Round as 'The People's University'.

Despite strong policy signals, many traditional higher education providers will find it challenging to deliver lifelong learning at scale. Institutional structures and systems, business models, and academic cultures have evolved around time-bound degree programmes, with limited incentives to support smaller units of learning or non-linear student journeys.

By contrast, the University of London's federal structure and historic mission confer distinct advantages in responding to the lifelong learning agenda today:

- It has been doing lifelong learning for over a century, in one form or another.
- With UoL able to act as a central awarding body for the federation, there is an available common credit currency, overcoming challenges around credit accumulation and credit transfer.
- Its infrastructure, culture and core access mission mean it is already oriented towards the kind of flexible education envisaged by the emerging policy and funding mechanism.

Building on existing strengths, the University is developing a cross-federation lifelong learning model that brings together academic expertise, digital delivery, and flexible credential frameworks. Microcredentials and modular provision are being designed to allow learners to enter, exit, and re-enter education over time, with clear progression routes into formal awards.

The University of London Careers Service is embedding global employability skills directly into the micro-credentials, ensuring learners develop the capabilities needed to thrive in an increasingly interconnected world. These short stackable learning experiences integrate practical, future-focused employability development alongside academic content, expanding access to skills that enable career progression.

A new 'Global Digital Campus' platform is being developed to realise a hyper-accessible student journey, dispensing with much of the custom and practice that has accreted around students' higher education experience. Through this work, the University of London is not simply adapting to external change, but drawing on its own history to help shape the future of lifelong learning in higher education.

Acknowledgements

Particular thanks to Ben Rogers and Angharad Eyre at University of London for their advice and guidance, to the essayists who contributed their perspectives, to all those who attended the round table events in early 2025 for their generosity with their time and wisdom, and to Siobhan Pipa and Eoin Thomas for their support with the publication and round tables.

Author

Richard Brown is a policy analyst, researcher and writer, specialising in urban development and governance, innovation and higher education, and London's economy and history.

Over 25 years, Richard has worked in a wide range of London institutions – helping to set up the Greater London Authority and working for the first Mayor of London, establishing the organisational infrastructure for the 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games and legacy, developing the business plan for Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park, and leading the research and events teams at Centre for London, the independent think tank for the capital.

Richard is an associate fellow at the University of London's School of Advanced Study, a trustee of SOAS University of London, and a founding director of London Modern, which celebrates modernism in the metropolis. He has degrees from Birkbeck University of London and University of Oxford.

UNIVERSITY
OF LONDON