

Education Committee Call for Evidence on Higher Education and Funding: Threat of Insolvency and International Students

July 2025

<https://committees.parliament.uk/call-for-evidence/3680/>

Organisational introduction

[The Science Council](#) is a Royal Charter charity, a collaborative connecting and amplifying hub for [30+ professional bodies](#) across the breadth of science. Collectively, these organisations have over 320,000 individual members in every type of role across the science workforce.

Our vision is a diverse and growing science profession that is trusted, respected, innovative and equipped to meet regional, national and global challenges.

We work to strengthen the collective impact of the science community for public benefit. We do this by connecting the science professions to foster knowledge exchange and through our [professional registers](#), which offer interdisciplinary recognition. We licence four professional registers Chartered Scientist (CSci), Registered Scientist (RSci), Registered Science Technician (RSciTech) and Chartered Science Teacher (CSciTeach), and have UK and international registrants.

The Science Council works with a wide range of professionals from universities and research institutions including scientists, technicians and the professions necessary to support science and innovation. [We champion T Levels and apprenticeships](#), including at degree level, and provide information tailored for the needs of science teachers, students and their parents. We work with a wide range of employers, professional bodies, learned societies and national organisations that shape the landscape for scientists, science technicians, and science educators. We focus on the science workforce and cross-cutting themes, particularly EDI, technical education and technicians, and skills/expertise gaps.

We are submitting our evidence following feedback from our members who have raised concerns regarding the situation for science in higher education and its consequences for communities, regions and the UK.

Our submission will focus on the following area in the Call for Evidence:

Ramifications of Institutional Insolvency and Regional Impact

1. What would be the consequence of a higher education provider becoming insolvent?

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Universities across the devolved nations are not only pillars of academic excellence and research but they are also **assets of national and international significance**. They shape global perceptions of the UK, foster international partnerships and project our nation's values and innovation worldwide.

There is, however, a misconception that UK universities operate as a single system, run by the UK government; in reality, they are independent institutions in four nations, competing globally for talent, funding and prestige. This independence is a strength but also a vulnerability.

The financial failure of any university could send shockwaves beyond its nation. It would **damage the UK's global reputation**, undermine confidence in our UK higher education sector, and risk diverting international students, staff and investment to competitor nations. In a world where reputation is a currency, the stakes would be high if an institution became insolvent. This would not be limited to those currently involved with the university. Degrees awarded in the past would likely lose value in the eyes of graduates and employers, similarly for staff who have that university as a significant part of their professional history.

The immediate fall-out if a university became insolvent would include a **need to implement student protections** that are in place, and any new, additional protections that may result from this call for evidence. **Complex contractual and logistical challenges** would need to be managed for ongoing research and consultancy commitments, and for facilities and equipment that are of regional, national or international importance.

Universities are key to the growth and sustainability of the science workforce and losing higher education provision will impact on the **availability of qualified scientists and related professions**, vital to delivering a raft of Government strategies including: the Modern Industrial Strategy; the Strategic Defence Review; The 10 year Health Plan for England; the Population Health Framework 2025-2035 for Scotland; A Healthier Wales: long term plan for health and social care; and the Health & Social Care NI Three Year Plan.

All areas of UK life rely on science, and we **require skilled, qualified scientists and associated professions to deliver our national interests**. Often, these are professions that require degree-level qualifications. The Modern Industrial Strategy Sector Plans recognise that scientists are mainly trained in universities, with substantial numbers continuing to work in universities.

Science Council members are concerned about the **reduction of STEM courses** across the country, as highlighted in examples in this submission. Universities trying to trim their costs to avoid insolvency are more likely to cut courses with higher costs, such as the sciences. These individual decisions, rational at the institutional level, accumulate into regional and national consequences that require more strategic political consideration.

University closures would have other impacts. With the challenges facing higher education funding, there are already **geographic ‘cold spots’** which could increase for science disciplines important for the delivery of the Modern Industrial Strategy. This includes geophysics courses (see case study below). The Royal Society of Chemistry (RSC) has reported chemistry departments closing in the University of Hull and Bangor University, leading to regional cold spots in chemistry teaching in East Yorkshire and the Humber, and North Wales. This reduces opportunities in regions that are already disadvantaged, and because academic degrees are the main way technical skills come into the workforce in chemistry. The Institute of Physics (IOP) has also seen first-hand the consequences of closing university departments. In 2006, the University of Reading’s physics department closed, which resulted in damage to climate change research in the region, as it was physics that underpinned Reading’s world-class centre on climate change. Across the Science Council membership, there are similar concerns about cold spots and the loss of nationally important talent and infrastructure. For example, mathematics is also shrinking in our universities, yet it is a cornerstone for the delivery of several Modern Industrial Strategy Sector Plans.

Case study from Science Council members: The Geological Society & Royal Astronomical Society

Sciences where there are shrinking numbers of applicants, and university courses, are particularly vulnerable to higher education institutions folding. For example, geophysics is a strategically important discipline that is already impacted by a reduction in university courses.

Courses closed or closing include the BSc honours programmes in Liverpool, Southampton and Aberdeen, and the Imperial College MSci programme. Those currently vulnerable include the BSc programme in Edinburgh, the MSc programme in Aberdeen, and the BSc joint degree with physics in Liverpool.

Geophysics is a discipline of significant strategic importance for the UK. Geophysicists have and will continue to play a critical role in securing energy security, delivering Net Zero targets for CO₂ emissions, and in the discovery and exploitation of new energy and mineral resources.

Too few geophysics graduates will inevitably mean a continued reliance on recruiting from overseas to meet these challenges. The data demonstrates that insufficiencies are stark: there are [around 2.5 times as many job openings in geophysics each year as there are graduating students.](#)

Furthermore, with the closure of these courses, we see redundancy of academic staff leading to a major loss in research expertise. Geophysicists in higher education work closely with their peers in industry and the public sector. With climate change being one of the greatest threats, we need geophysics to address and mitigate it.

These cold spots in turn, impact employment and skill shortages. An [Institute of Physics report](#) found 40% of physics innovators saying skills shortages were a significant challenge to their undertaking of research and innovation. The demand for degree-level physics skills has been rising, with the number of jobs for

physical scientists growing by 40% between 2010-2020. The RSC's 2025 report, [Future Workforce and Educational Pathways](#) projects 6.5% job growth in the UK chemical sciences over the next decade, which will require a steady and diverse talent pipeline of chemistry graduates and apprentices.

These impacts across science subjects will not only challenge the delivery of Government policy but also disadvantage people unable to access higher education within a reasonable distance from home to follow a career in science. Skills gaps will increase.

Universities are also key providers of **apprenticeships and T Level placements** for cohorts of learners that include significant numbers of marginalised learners, people for whom a traditional degree course is not feasible due to income, family circumstances or individual needs. Apprenticeships and T Levels are excellent ways to encourage more young people into science careers to fill gaps in the science workforce, such as the MEGA Degree Apprenticeship in Northern Ireland, run by a collaborative member network of 43 small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), in partnership with Ulster University and the NI Department for the Economy. The programme works with schools to inspire young people of all backgrounds to use the degree apprenticeship programme as a route into work in design, manufacturing, production of project engineering, and more. The SMEs benefit from their relationships with the universities and from training staff to deliver their business needs in support of growth and innovation.

Closure of a higher education institution will inevitably impact **research and development** with the loss of skilled academics and academic practitioners who may be unable to find appropriate research opportunities without moving abroad. The Government has invested significantly in research and development and Universities are vital sources for this. Universities work closely with Science Parks which deliver world-class research and development, including space fusion, med-tech, agri-tech and cybersecurity, which would be at risk.

2.How do higher education institutions contribute to growth in their local economies, the provision of public services, and their wider communities?

Universities **are anchor institutions** in their town and region. They are often **the major employer** in their local community and jobs at every level rely on them, generating significant income. They are also a significant source of staff for public sector services, including for hospitals, schools, social care, and the justice system, to name a few. However, the Institute of Physics and Engineering in Medicine (IPEM), for example, are concerned because courses in these specialisms require on-the-job training and assessment alongside study and there is insufficient funding or dedicated time for colleagues to teach or assess.

Local commerce benefits from having higher education institutions in its region, as there is a wide range of suppliers and local businesses that service the higher education institutions and their associated support services. In addition, the local housing market benefits from the needs of the institutions, employees, and students.

Higher institutions work with **over 130 science parks** across the four nations, providing a source of research development and innovation in the local community, which in turn provides knowledge and opportunity in the region and growth across all nations. [Science Parks provide jobs for around 100,000](#) employees in high-value jobs. This symbiotic relationship provides vital opportunities for education, skills development and innovation and disruptions could take years to rebuild in alternative forms with lasting consequences for regional and national growth.

Higher educational institutions in a region can support **local communities to access education and raise aspirations**. Through outreach programmes and research programmes they can **impact socio-economic deprivation and support community cohesion**. Universities contribute thousands of hours of volunteering in their communities each year as staff and students gain valuable experience within communities, often providing pro bono work, benefiting all parties.

Case study from Science Council Member: Chartered Association of Sport and Exercise Sciences (CASES)

This case study illustrates the relationships between a professional body - CASES and the higher education sector, focusing on sport and exercise science.

CASES, a Science Council member, has highlighted that because the University sector creates, sustains, and animates sports education science, accredited careers exist and contribute to the economy (e.g. biomechanics, physiology, psychology and clinical exercise physiologists).

Sports professions have helped Britain become a global sporting power and led to the development of evidence-based physical activity interventions that drive public health interventions. Without the higher education sector, sports education science would not exist or deliver the benefits it does to the economy, health and sport. This discipline is one that encourages access to higher education from disadvantaged groups.

There are currently 21 sports science laboratories based in the UK, 16 of which are in universities. These are important learning centres.

Sports education science higher education [provides an impact of £3.9 billion in added income to the UK](#) economy every year.

3.What strategies should be implemented to prevent insolvency and ensure sustainable regional provision of courses?

- Find policy levers that enable regional and national evaluation of university provision to prevent critical cold spots, and to continue to fuel regional and national growth and innovation.
- Strengthen regional collaboration by sharing more services and infrastructure. 91% of senior leaders who were [surveyed by the Universities UK Taskforce](#) supported this approach.
- Develop early warning systems for institutions facing financial difficulties with their stakeholders to coordinate and support universities in financial distress.
- To reduce the impact if a university is facing insolvency that cannot be avoided, consider incentives to support the strategically important facets of the university (considering the regional, national and international levels) to merge with another suitable organisation.
- Fund regional innovation clusters around universities to drive research and development, entrepreneurship and inward investment. This would support economies of scale and sector buying power.
- Regional and national authorities (in England, Strategic Authorities and Skills Improvement Plans; in Scotland, Skills Development Scotland and Regional Economic Partnerships; the Northern Ireland Department for Economy and City Deals; in Wales, Regional Skills Partnerships and City Growth Deal Skills Panels) control around £2bn in skills funding which could support the relationship between universities and employers to embed scientific technical pathways within local strategies and address higher education to mitigate skills gaps in key science subjects.

ENDS.