



# The Role of the Registrar: *Five years on*

November 2023



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The Association of Heads of University Administration (AHUA) is the representative body for senior University managers (Registrars, Chief Operating Officers, Heads of Administration, University Secretaries) in the United Kingdom and Ireland, with Associate Members in other countries.

The AHUA has 190 members from 140 institutions and is managed by an elected Executive Committee.

The AHUA aims to represent the collective views of members on key issues and policies to the Higher Education (HE) sector, government and other stakeholders. It also brings together members to exchange information, share knowledge and experience, and to develop colleagues who aim to fill senior roles in Higher Education administration.

## How we compiled the report

In this report, we wanted to get a sense of how AHUA members felt about their roles in 2023, but also to compare it with the results we published in 2018.

As a result, we kept our approach as similar as possible. In 2018, we invited 180 members across 135 institutions to complete an online survey with questions about their roles. We received 81 responses. In 2023, we did the same, and 78 members responded to some or all of the questions in the survey.

As the responses were anonymised, we cannot gauge how many respondents contributed to both surveys. Therefore we present this information as a sample of views rather than a direct study of how individual roles and responsibilities have changed.

This report was compiled by Pickle Jar Communications, a digital marketing consultancy specialising in Higher Education.

We'd like to take this opportunity to thank all of the members who took part in this survey for their time, and their considered responses.

# Introduction

The role of a Registrar is a vital one.

As the figure charged with leading administration for their university, they are tasked with supporting the institution through a variety of internal, national and global challenges in pursuit of strategic goals.

Those who take on this challenge often find themselves assuming a range of responsibilities, including administration, compliance and data protection. As one of our survey respondents wisely said, it's a position that requires a blend of "resilience, strategic thinking, and interpersonal skills".

However, it is a role that often varies between institutions. Even the name of the job can be different from place to place (but we will use the term "Registrar" in this document to avoid confusion).

A few years ago, AHUA set out to examine this role in more detail, by surveying its members on the nature of their positions. We asked questions about their background, the length of time they had been in the post, and delved deeper into themes such as the skills they felt were important to succeed, as well as the challenges they faced, now and in the future.

In a report published in 2018, our members talked about the range of responsibilities they took on as part of their role. While some saw their position as heavily governance-based, others found themselves taking on broader, more managerial responsibilities. They also recognised the abilities of those that supported them, and highlighted the importance of communication, teamwork and expertise in building an effective team.

Back in 2018, our members anticipated a number of challenges on the horizon, from sector-wide financial pressures and competition to the impact of Brexit. But none could have expected the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, which forced institutions to completely rethink how they taught, and how to build connections with current and incoming staff and students.

As institutions build and plan for the future, we believed it was time to revisit our original question, and find out how much the role of Registrar has changed in the intervening years.

We once again reached out to our members to find out what their role entailed in 2023, and what advice they would give to the next generation of professionals taking that leap.

# The responsibilities of a Registrar

In 2018, our members talked about their role as a wide-ranging position that required communication, patience and good judgement. How much has changed in the last five years?

Every ambitious university has a clear strategy that outlines how they want to build and grow over the next few years. The task of the Registrar is to support and enable the delivery of that vision.

It is a role that requires a calm head, as well as an ability to balance long-term planning with day-to-day coordination. A thriving university campus is home to teaching and learning, but also to world-class research, personal and professional development, and a huge range of activities, partnerships and ideas.

The role itself often involves supporting the Chair of the governing body with legal and procedural matters, and advising the Vice-Chancellor on decisions that impact the sustainability and success of the university. In addition, Registrars are also frequently responsible for professional services, directing the activities of teams working in student services, estates, HR, and planning.

## Job titles

Universities are very different places, often with very different needs and priorities. As a result, even the title of this job can vary significantly.

While in the past, the title of Registrar may have been more common, relatively few refer to themselves as such. This is perhaps due to the changing requirements of the position. The modern “Registrar” may be taking on a lot more diverse responsibilities than their predecessors, perhaps even blending two or more jobs due to financial and staffing pressures.

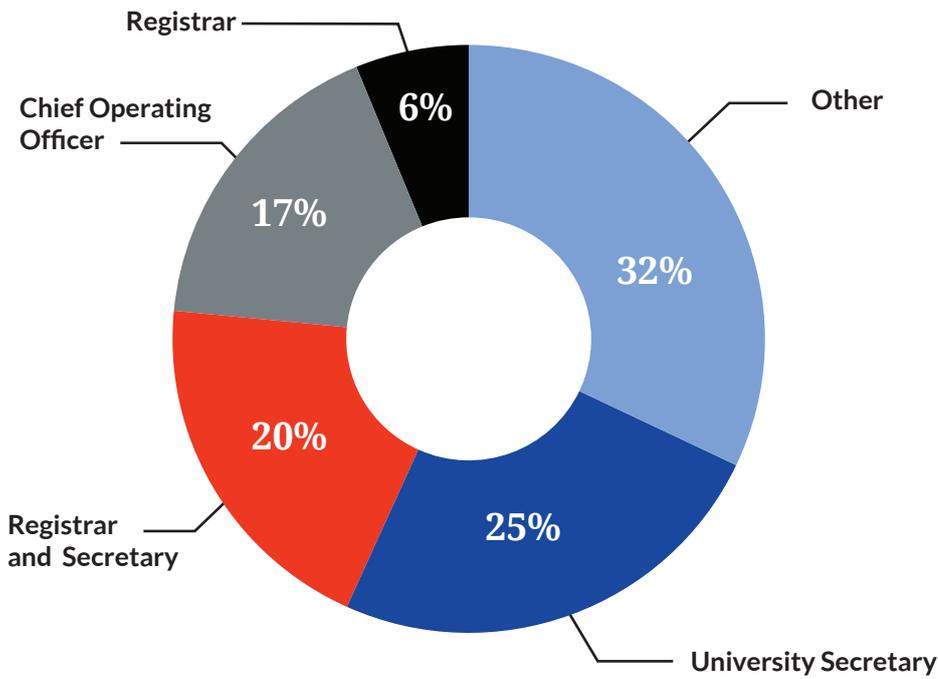
## What has changed?

As we discovered in 2018, the role of Registrar comes in many different forms. Today, more than a quarter of respondents identified their job title as “Chief Operating Officer”, making it the most popular title in our survey.

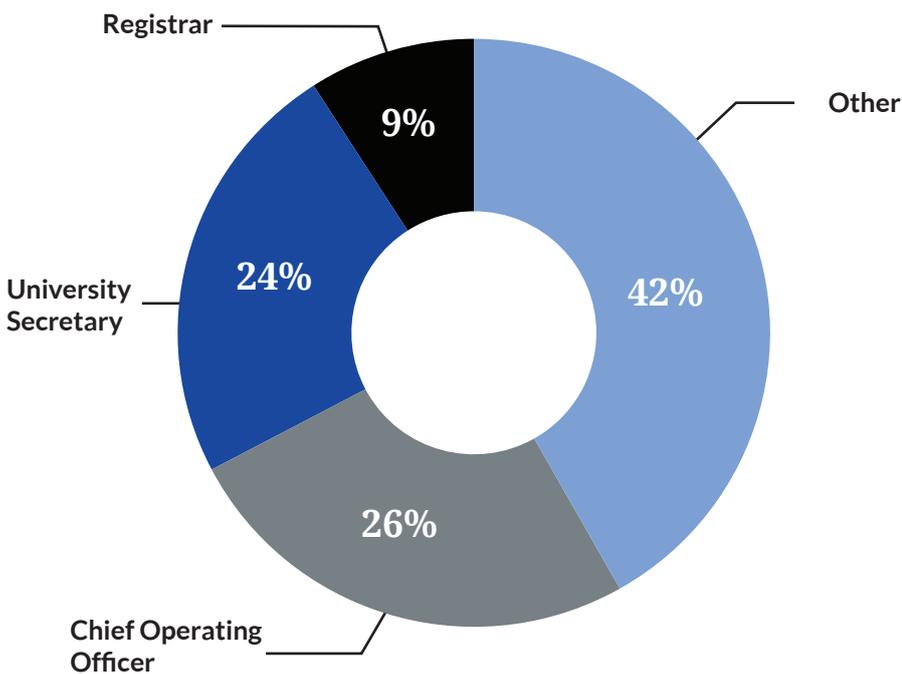
This is perhaps unsurprising, considering the pressure on modern universities and Higher Education institutions to become more business-focused. However, the role of “University Secretary” remains heavily represented.

Just under 10% of respondents still hold the role of “Registrar” but - as in 2018 - there’s a vast array of other subtly different titles, reflecting the range of roles wrapped up in this post.

**2018 results:**



**2023 results:**



**List of other titles:**

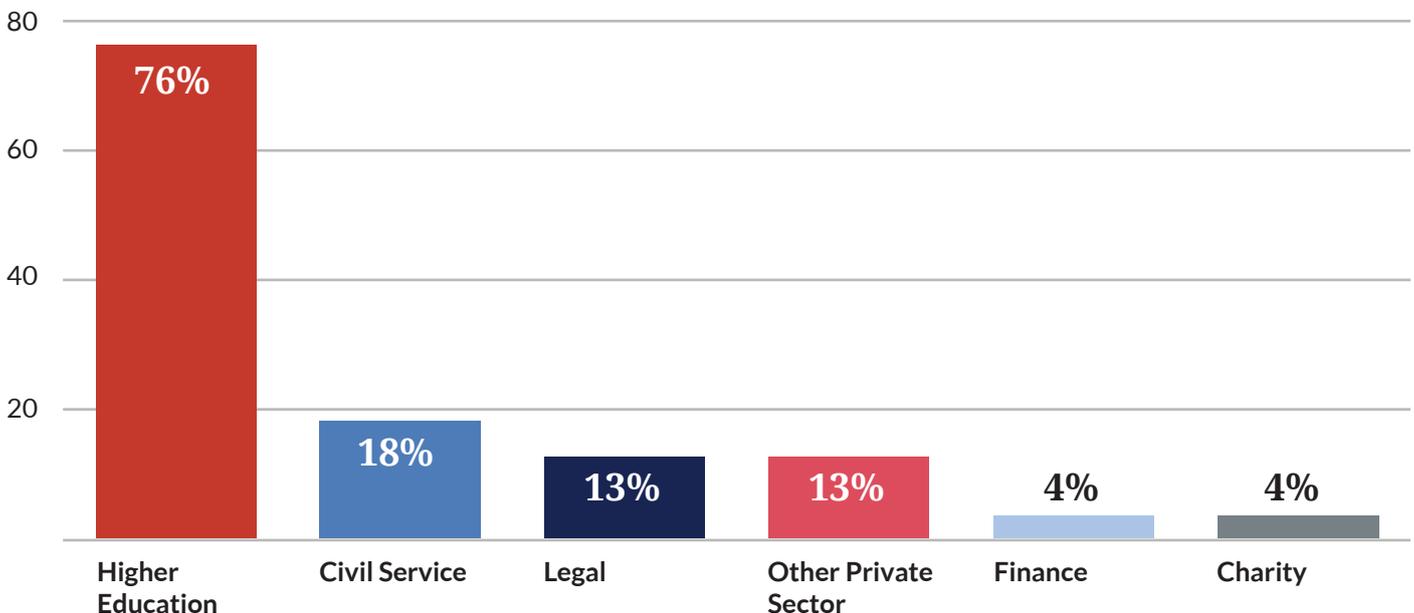
- College Secretary and Clerk to the Governors
- Registrar and Secretary
- Chief Operating Officer, University Secretary and DVC - Operations
- Chief Student Officer and University Secretary
- Deputy Chief Executive and Secretary
- Vice Principal, Governance
- Registrar and Chief Administrative Officer
- Director of Governance, Legal and Assurance Services and Clerk to Council
- University Secretary and Chief Compliance Officer
- Pro-Vice-Chancellor Governance and Student Affairs
- Senior Vice-President - Registrar and Secretary
- Vice-President (Operations)

## Where did you come from?

The vast majority of Registrars still come from a Higher Education background. But as universities come to terms with new expectations and challenges, some institutions have chosen to recruit talent with experience in different industries.

As in 2018, the largest proportion of outside hires came from the Private Sector and Civil Service, with the Legal, Financial and Charity sectors also represented. Others declared a background in Arts and Cultural Organisations, and even international organisations such as NATO, the UN and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

### 2023 results:

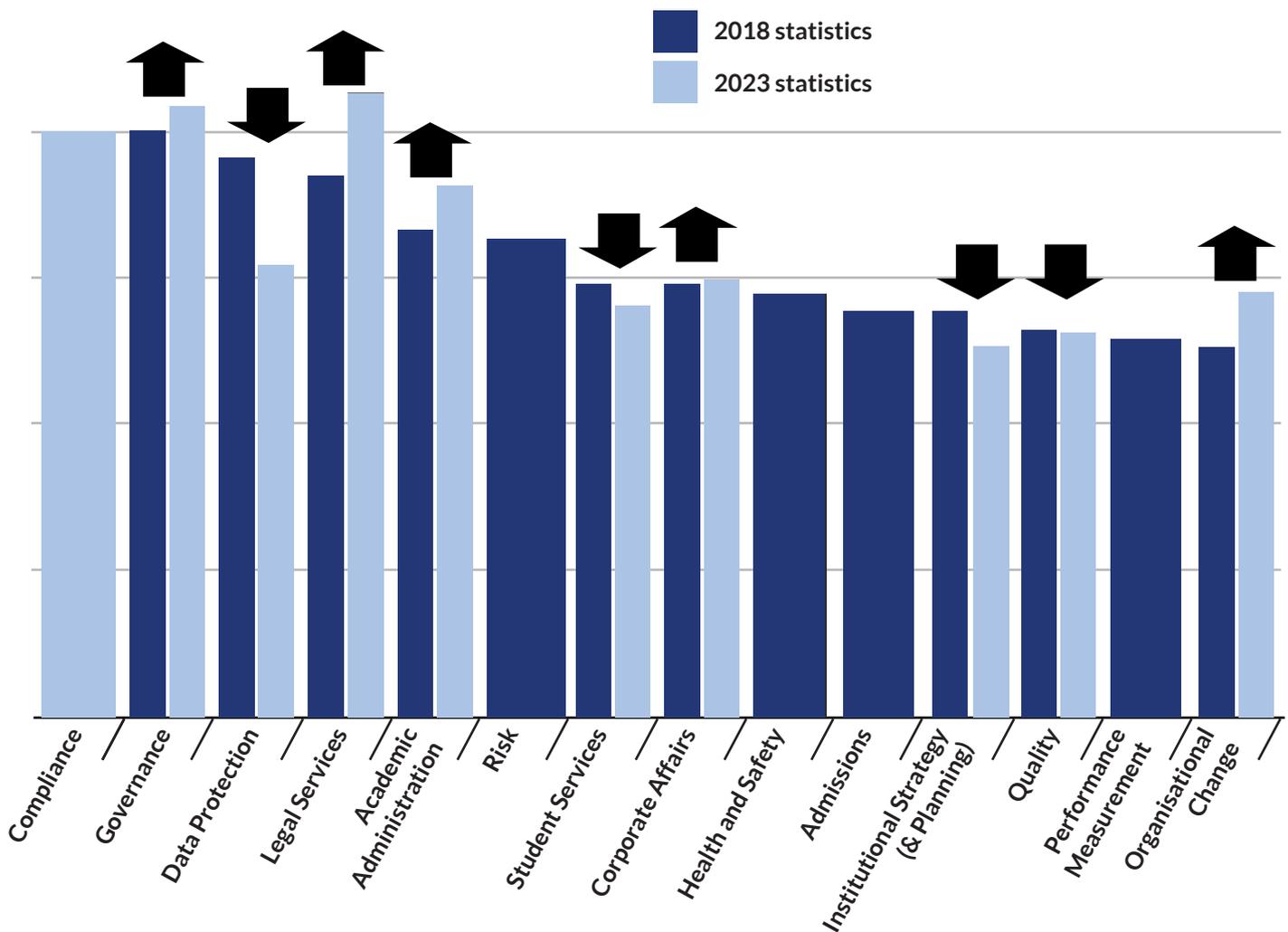


# Which responsibilities do you hold?

Our previous survey highlighted the sheer diversity of responsibilities contained in this role. The 2023 survey was no different.

Governance remains a key part of the role for most of our respondents, but Legal Services rose to the top in our 2023 survey. A significant number of our members also stressed the importance of Compliance and Administration.

It's not unusual for Registrars to assume other related responsibilities as their roles change, and our responses also included areas such as IT services, Marketing and Communications, Sustainability, Community and Business Engagement as well as Procurement.

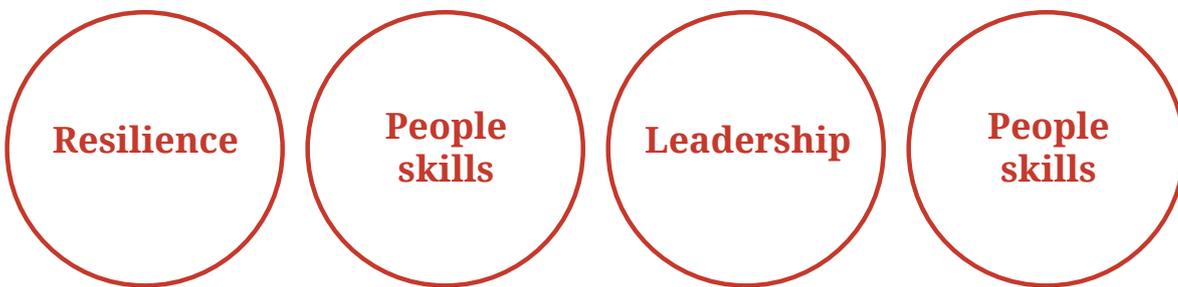


# The qualities of a Registrar

As with any important job, a Registrar often has to draw on their own personal qualities to succeed. These could be innate characteristics, or skills honed over time.

Five years ago, we asked our members which skills they felt were most important in helping a Registrar thrive in their post.

While the responses were naturally varied, the most commonly mentioned traits were:



Many of these remain true today. Let us look at these four traits in turn, and see how respondents define them in 2023:

## 1. Resilience

Many of our members brought up this trait almost immediately. That is not a huge shock, considering the pace of change affecting modern universities and Higher Education institutions.

From Brexit to COVID-19 to increased and shifting regulation, dealing with outside challenges has been a big part of the role of the Registrar in recent years..

Many members talked about the need for:

- *Calm*
- *Flexibility*
- *Problem-solving*
- *Attention to detail*
- *Determination*
- *Decisiveness*
- *Fearlessness*
- *Effective workload management and ability to pivot*
- *The ability to respond to a crisis*

One respondent said a good Registrar had to have “the ability to see round corners”, while another added they should be able to “work in a complex environment without clear direction”.

“Resilience. Adaptability. Optimism. Diplomacy. Perspective...and a sense of humour!”

“Curiosity and the problem-solving skills to understand what is unearthed, combined with resilience, fearlessness and tenacity”

“Making sense of madness, and being able to see the end game”

## 2. People skills

Back in 2018, respondents pointed to the need to delegate effectively, motivate and empower others, build partnerships, and to engage with empathy and inclusivity.

They also referred to the importance of communication skills at a range of levels.

These skills are still highly prized in 2023, although many also referred to the importance of building consensus and guiding teams towards change. This perhaps reflects the fact that universities have had to change quickly and decisively in recent years, particularly in response to the pandemic.

“Knowing which battles to pick!”

Several respondents talked about:

- *Transformation and change management*
- *The ability to network and collaborate*
- *Consensus building*
- *Approachability*
- *Focus and drive while collaborating*
- *Compassion*
- *Partnership while working with the Executive Team*

“It is imperative that I operate with integrity, honesty, empathy and compassion to be successful in this role”

## 3. Leadership

Many roles prize leadership skills, but what do our members think makes a good leader?

In 2018, they talked about the importance of a clear vision, good judgement, clear decision-making and trustworthiness.

“You need the ability to balance long-term strategic needs with day-to-day challenges, and to make decisions in circumstances where all information isn’t available”

In 2023, they added:

- *The ability to see the bigger picture*
- *Presentation skills*
- *The ability to make tough and unpopular decisions*
- *Absolute integrity*
- *Creativity*
- *Harnessing talent*
- *Influencing and managing expectations*
- *An appetite for change*
- *Planning and organising teams*
- *Listening*

## 4. Political acumen

The need to recognise institutions as complex and political was something that was raised in 2018, and it's no less true now.

Registrars need a solid understanding of the politics of an institution to effect change, but they must also understand the wider landscape of Higher Education and beyond to ensure the university is well-placed to succeed.

Respondents talked about the need for:

- *Business nous*
- *Negotiating*
- *Diplomacy*
- *Tact*
- *Persuading and influencing*
- *Broad understanding of how Higher Education institutions work*

Some also highlighted the importance of standing firm when necessary, pointing to the need to be stubborn, and willing to challenge those at the top of an institution.

**“You need an ability to identify the core of the problem, while recognising the political ramifications of all the peripheral nonsense!”**

**“An ability to simplify the complex, and focus on a few priorities with the most strategic impact possible”**

**“Knowing when to stick to rules and when to flex them”**

# Building the right team

A successful Registrar is supported by a talented and driven team. But what characteristics do our members most value?

In a complex and often challenging environment, it's vital to be able to share responsibilities.

Back in 2018, members highlighted a number of important features that went into the ideal team, including:



In 2023, we asked the question again, and received the following additional insights:

## 1. Attention to detail

Focus was seen to be a very important quality amongst our respondents. Some members said they valued a team member who had a “technical knowledge of specialist areas”. Others were happy with a “willingness to learn” as long as it was complemented with professionalism and high standards.

Autonomy, flexibility and attention to detail, and a vision within their domain that accords with the university mission”

## 2. Creativity and vision

Respondents talked about the importance of being able to solve problems, as well as the ability to show “flexibility and open-mindedness”. They also highlighted the importance of “connecting their agenda to others as part of a bigger picture”.

“The ability to think creatively and find innovative solutions to new and intractable problems”

## 3. Autonomy

Many members highlighted how vital it was to have team members that they could empower to handle tasks and problems. These team members should be able to work across departments and be collaborative, but also know when to handle a situation or escalate it appropriately.

“The ability to take on tasks outside their comfort zone”

## The challenges of a Registrar

Registrars face a range of challenges. They need to manage the day-to-day, while keeping an eye on the future.

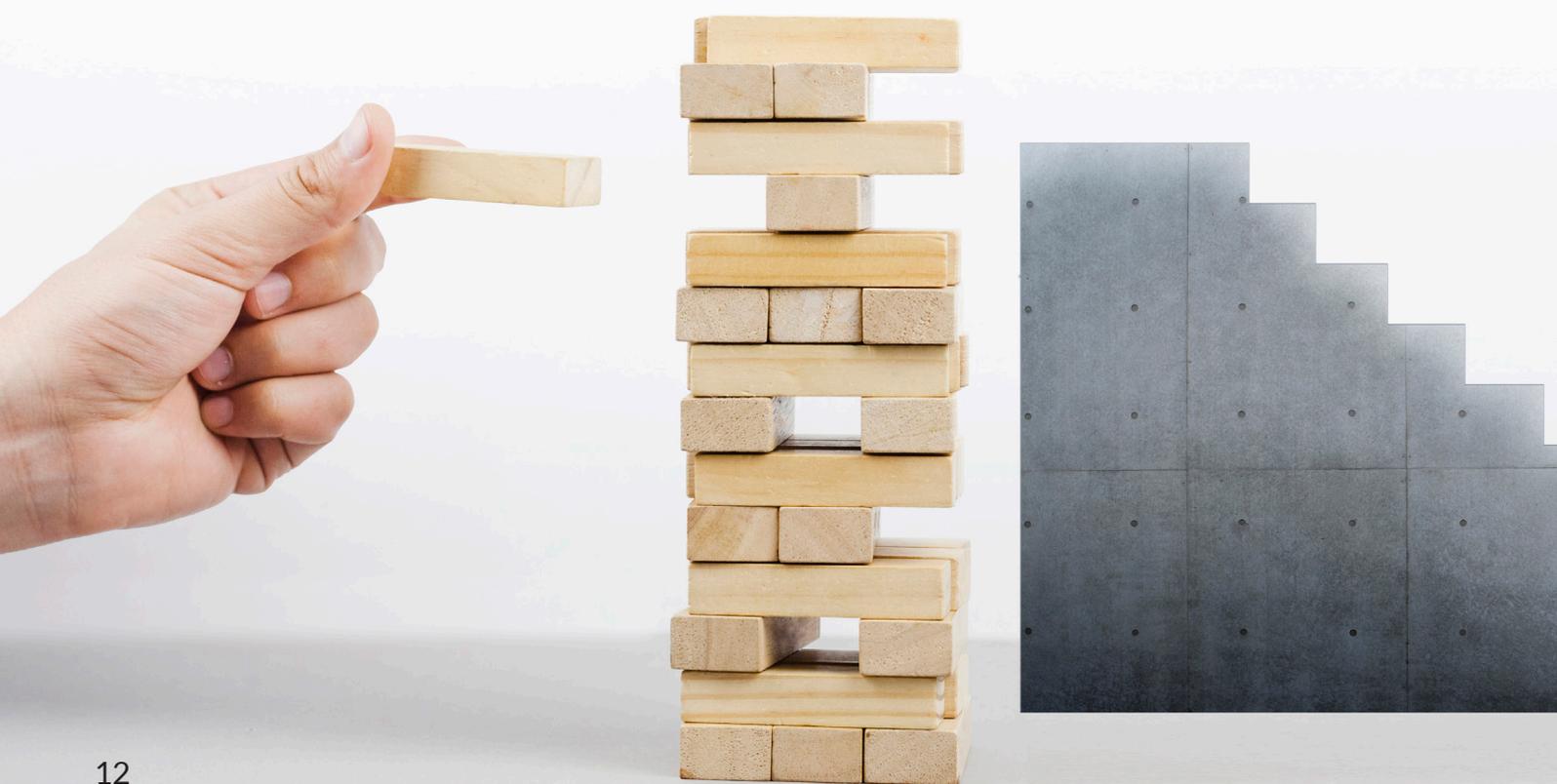
Our 2018 survey clearly illustrated the key challenge Registrars felt they faced. Nearly 40% of respondents said that relating to internal stakeholders was the most tricky aspect of their role.

They highlighted the need to understand what the Vice-Chancellor and Governors wanted and needed, while ensuring that the right approach was taken and that leaders gave others the space to deliver without “micromanagement”.

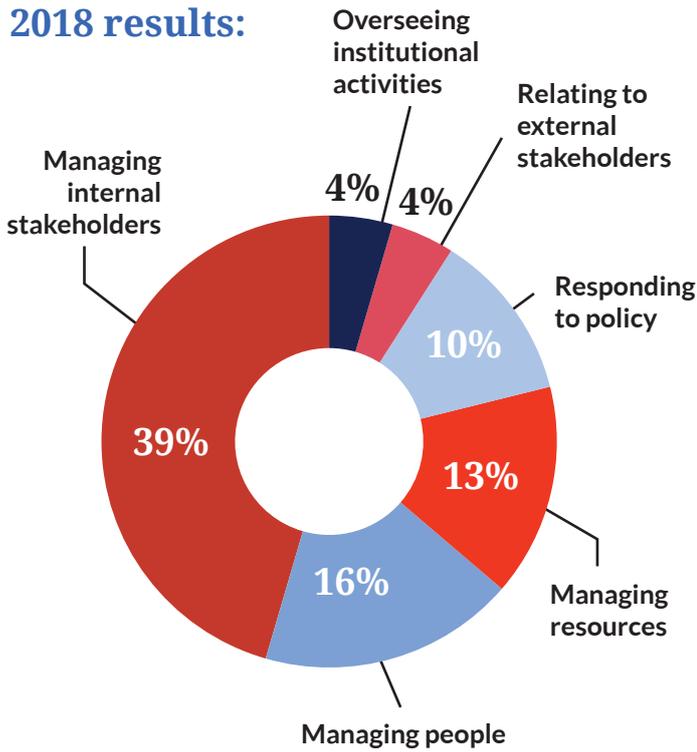
Others pointed to the challenge of managing people and resources, responding to policy and dealing with the pressures of managing a lot of work in a wide variety of areas.

In 2023, the main challenges remained the same. Registrars continue to highlight the challenge of managing key stakeholders and other academic colleagues, and keeping up-to-date with policy and other activities in the institution.

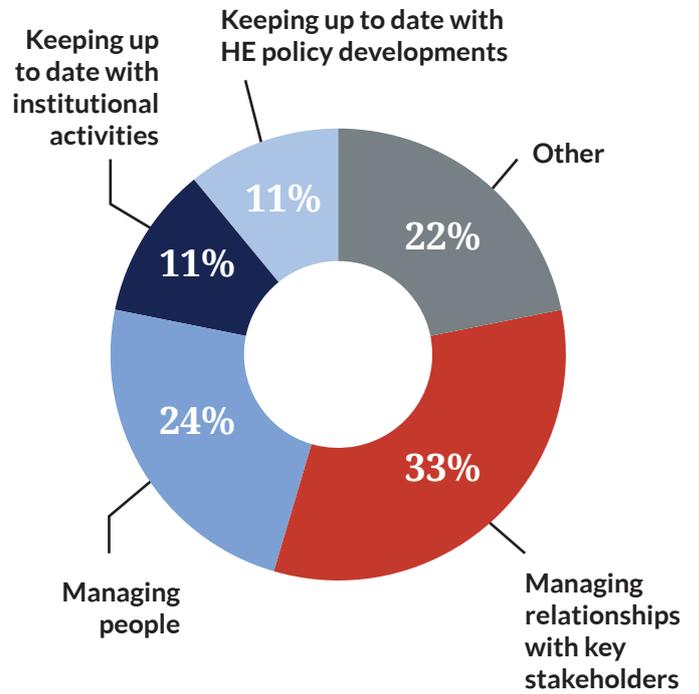
One specifically cited the trickiness of navigating “internal politics”, while another noted the stress of “keeping up-to-date with multiple regulators”.



**2018 results:**

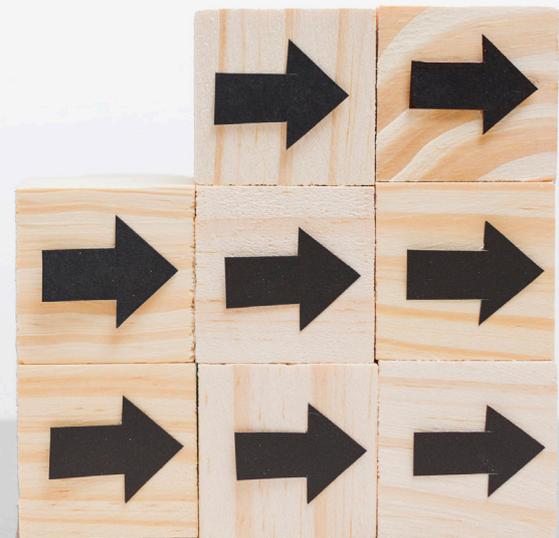


**2023 results:**



“Bringing coherence to a previously highly-devolved and fragmented operations model”

“All aspects of my role are challenging, but appropriately challenging - I enjoy it all!”



## Anticipating future challenges

A good Registrar does not merely focus on the here-and-now. They must be aware of future challenges and obstacles, and adapt to them to ensure their university's vision is delivered as effectively as possible.

Back in 2018, the challenges highlighted by our members were varied. Financial pressures such as reduced funding, fees, and funding reviews were high on the list, while the impact of regulation and potential government interference was a concern.

Brexit remained a source of uncertainty, while some believed the public perception of the value of Higher Education was not as positive as they would like. This was coupled with a volatile political landscape, and increased competition in student and staff recruitment.

Individual institutions said they were facing challenges as varied as the increased workload around REF and TEF, strikes, digital transformation, internationalisation, and workplace stress.

**"It's been a time of considerable flux and change. The role of the COO/Registrar has never been more important"**

**"It was always a tough gig. It's got tougher"**

### Looking back

Five years on, we asked respondents if there was anything they'd add to that list, looking back from 2023.

Obviously, the pandemic loomed large in many of the responses. Some said that the industry had not quite come to terms with the impact of COVID-19 on the workforce, and managing effective teams remotely. One said that the pandemic moved institutions into a more "hierarchical and operational space" and that they needed to "find space to operate at a more strategic level". Another pointed out that COVID-19 had sped up the digital transformation of the sector.

The role of the Office for Students was mentioned by a few respondents. One said that the implementation of "various conditions of registration" had "shifted staff focus away from developing innovative and tailored ways of supporting students" to a more "one-size-fits-all" approach. Another said they were concerned that the nature of regulation had become "more demanding and politically-driven".

Members also talked about challenges such as increased marketisation, and the need to be more aware of areas such as risk, resilience, governance, and business.

## So what future challenges do members anticipate now?

Some challenges are ever-present in the life of a Registrar. But which ones are at the front of their minds in 2023?

### In the sector as a whole

#### 1. The devaluation of HE

The concerns over the perception of Higher Education continue in 2023. One respondent admitted that there was a sense that the “perceived value, contribution and importance of the sector is being eroded”. Another feared that “the undergraduate model is broken.” Members pointed to issues such as international student recruitment and the challenge of highlighting the value of Higher Education for employability.

One member talked about the urgent need for “expressing the value of Higher Education to the economy and to students in particular”.

#### 2. Financial sustainability

The need to manage reduced budgets was a big worry for many members. Members pointed to the reduced income from home students, the cap on regulated fees, and the increased dependence on international students. But others pointed to deeper issues, such as an “unsustainable business model” which placed “students as consumers”.

Many anticipated calls for the use of technologies such as Artificial Intelligence to create efficiencies, and expressed concern that several would find themselves with “ever more to do, with ever diminishing resource”.

“The devaluation of HE in the face of industry and the professions devising other career routes”

#### 3. Government policy

Members also anticipated that regulation would continue to be a big part of their workload in future. One predicted a rise in the role of “Chief Compliance Officers” as universities dealt with the increasing volume and complexity of regulation.

One said that the current government demonstrated “a short term focus on the economy which challenges the fundamental purpose and value of universities”, while another worried that Higher Education was approaching a situation where high-tariff universities would grow while low-tariff ones would “become more niche and disappear”.

Would a change in government help? One respondent hoped they would see a “warmer approach”, but another feared that “a period of policy and funding inertia” might follow the next general election, while another said they doubted a Labour government would be the “silver bullet” some hoped for.

#### 4. Industrial action

Strikes and other industrial action have been features of the last couple of years in Higher Education, as with many other industries. Many expected them to continue in light of threats to finances from funding and government policy changes.

“The sector needs to demonstrate to the public why it is important. We need to celebrate our own USBs and what we collectively can contribute to society.”

“The intensified grinding of regulatory teeth”

“There is no HE strategy and so universities are pulled into all things with a lack of national coherence”

“Lack of government understanding and interest in Higher Education”

“The impact of apprenticeships and lifelong learning on traditional models of delivery”

## In individual institutions

With all this in mind, it is probably not a shock that many believed financial constraints would be a key challenge for their individual institutions in future.

Members believed this would have a long-term effect on their ability to grow as an institution, and that it would make it harder to maintain research excellence or correct areas of weakness.

It was pointed out that institutions would look to deliver “huge transformation portfolios” to maintain competitiveness, but that it would be difficult to achieve expected standards in the light of “increasing student/staff demands and shrinking budgets”.

As the Higher Education sector prepares for change, members pointed out there was a real risk of “change fatigue” which might lead to resistance. This would be coupled with the burden of significant senior staff turnover, interference by regulators and government, and a difficulty in recruiting and retaining talented staff.

A whole range of challenges were mentioned in response to our question, including:

- *Student recruitment*
- *Staff retention*
- *Policy incoherence*
- *Industrial action*
- *Management of workload and human resources*
- *Competition*
- *Compliance*
- *Estates and IT infrastructure changes*
- *Pacing change*
- *Industrial relations*
- *Growth in demand for student mental health and wellbeing services*
- *Cyber attacks*

“The impact of the frozen tuition fee and inflation will continue to be acute”

“Keeping up to date with OfS requirements and remaining financially healthy”

“Re-building trust and a sense of community”

“The need to develop new revenue streams to invest for the future”

## Skills for the future

With all of these challenges approaching, what skills will Registrars and their team need for the future?

A large majority of respondents were very clear that teams needed the ability to manage change. One talked about the need to “deliver a greater level of change at a greater speed”, and to be able to “cope with further changes and external pressures”.

There was also a sense that teams would need to master and keep up to date with emerging technologies to help manage their workload and budget constraints. Some talked about the importance of “better digital skills”, a focus on data analytics and AI, and moving to “a 24/7 environment”.

But it’s clear that there’s also an expectation that there are limits to what can be achieved without the right working environment. One said that teams were already at capacity, and were continually being asked to take on more. There was talk about needing to hone their ability to deal with conflict in their institutions, and “helping governors live with uncertainty”. But another added that the responsibility for efficiency was shared, saying: “agile working requires more agile management.”

“Myself and my team are change practitioners - we are used to a continual cycle of improvement, but we are testing the limits of resilience”

“Clairvoyance would help”

“We don’t say no often enough”

“We just need greater bandwidth”

“Knowing what good looks like”

## Advice for the next generation?

Registrars have weathered storms, climbed mountains, and built bridges. So what advice would they give to those following in their footsteps?

Our members had some excellent advice for those with aspirations of rising to the role of Registrar in future.

Many talked about the importance of building relationships, and communicating well with others. They mentioned that working closely with other members of the executive team was “essential”, but that Registrars should also

develop the ability to work across the institution, and become the person “who acts as the glue”.

Others pointed to the need to be adaptable and to expect the unexpected every day”, but also “not to be afraid to ask for help.”

Here are just a few of the words of wisdom offered by our members this year:

**“Don’t be a robot”**

**“95% of the job of the Registrar is not actually the role of the Registrar”**

**“If your primary role is governance, learn to let go of your ego...we’re there to provide an effective decision-making process, not to make the substantive decision”**

**“Gain as much breadth of experience as possible”**

**“Be your own person, but work for the best interest of your institution”**

**“Take a breath, and don’t get caught up in the business imposed by others”**

**“This role is a lifestyle. It requires creative thinking, resilience and emotional intelligence”**

**“This role is far less about professional expertise in specific areas and more about**

**managing change, breaking down silos, and challenging people to think differently”**

**“Focus on delivery, not compliance. The job is changing, and new Registrars/COOs need to be change agents much more so than in the past”**

**“Academics don’t run universities just like doctors don’t run hospitals”**

**“Learn not to take criticism personally, and be comfortable not being able to do everything”**

**“Build mutual trust and confidence with the VC and Chair”**

**“What got you here won’t get you there - so get comfortable with change and be adaptable, but stay true to your values”**

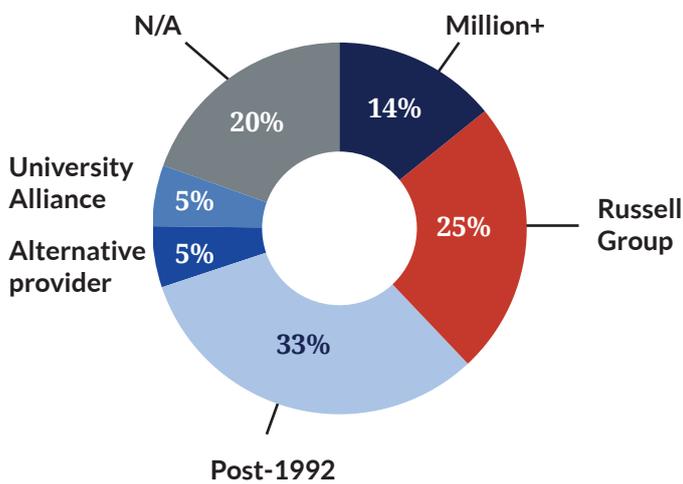
**“It’s a great job, but not for the faint-hearted. Make sure you listen to the academic community and work to engage them in what you are doing”**

## About the survey respondents

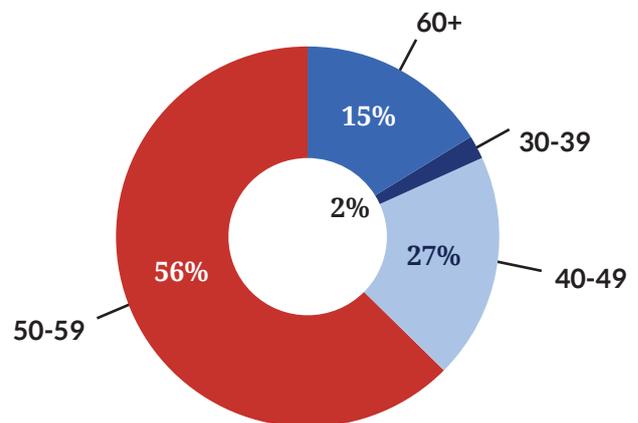
A little bit of detail about the AHUA members that responded to our survey in the United Kingdom and Ireland.

We asked our respondents some questions about their institution, age, gender and the length of time they'd been at their institution. Here are the results we received from those that answered.

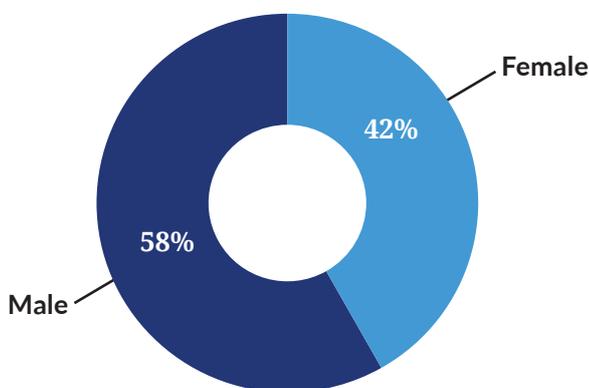
### Institution



### Age



### Gender



No respondents to the options of 'Non-binary', 'Prefer not to say', 'Prefer to self-describe'.

### Tenure

