

Catalysts for Collaboration

In September 2026 AHUA and AHEP brought together a group of University Professional services leaders, from both executive and departmental levels, to explore the role of collaboration in the future of UK higher education. We were delighted to have the support of Technology One as our partners for the event.

Collaboration has become a central question for the sector. Economic pressure on the country and on universities means we are all being asked to be more effective and efficient and working together is one way to achieve that. But collaboration is about more than efficiency. It means learning from others and combining forces to find opportunities none of us could reach alone. It shapes how the parts of a university work together and how universities serve their cities and regions, supporting public services and strengthening communities. It can also drive transformation, enhance the student experience and extend our public benefit whilst allowing us to act as allies within a competitive market.

Our conference was energetic and engaging, bringing members of both associations together to explore what might be possible. harnessing the power of our respective members to explore the art of the possible. This brochure sums up some of the ideas and recommendations from the day and the real appetite that exists for creative co working across university professional services.

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Conclusion

As well as sharing delegates ideas with our wider membership, AHUA and AHEP will explore which of them would benefit from shared stewardship by professional associations. Guided by feedback from members we will identify and shape a joint project where our associations can make the greatest contribution. Our aim is a tangible output that supports and showcases collaboration across the sector.

Thanks to all our members who joined us as delegates and to the various organisations who helped create the conversation.

7 Collaborative Principles

Clarity of
Vision

Leadership
the creates
and builds
momentum

Trust
between
partners

Measures that
communicate
and demonstrate
success

Strong project
management

Mutual
Benefit

Bringing
People with
you

Adapted from the conference keynote address from professor Malcolm Press CBE DL, Vice Chancellor, Manchester Metropolitan University and President, Universities UK

Design Lab Workshops

Delegates worked in three parallel rooms across the day, each examining collaboration in UK higher education from a different vantage point: ONE (collaboration within institutions), ACROSS (collaboration between institutions), and BEYOND (collaboration with partners outside the sector). In the morning, each room diagnosed where collaboration has worked and what gets in its way. In the afternoon, tables built concrete ideas in response. This report summarises both.

Morning discussions — what we heard

Barriers to collaboration

Five barriers came up repeatedly across all three rooms — expressed differently depending on the scale of collaboration under discussion, but recognisably the same underlying issues.

- 1** Time and seed funding to get started. Whether it's the day job crowding out new work, the financial risk of seconding staff, or a lack of pump-priming funds for a civic partnership, almost every table named this as the first thing standing in the way.
- 2** Structures and incentives that reward staying in your lane. Individual teams, and individual institutions, are rarely rewarded for looking beyond their own remit — even where collaboration would benefit everyone.
- 3** Fragmented systems and regulation. Ageing or bespoke systems, inconsistent data standards, and regulatory quirks (VAT, dual reporting requirements) all make joining things up harder than it should be.
- 4** Success that goes untold. Good collaboration often isn't visible beyond the room it happened in — while difficult projects get remembered and discourage the next attempt.
- 5** Fear, ego and the pull of the status quo. From concerns about reputational risk to a reluctance to cede control or admit a partner might do something better, personal and organisational caution held collaboration back as much as any process did.

What makes it work when it does

Set against these barriers, delegates were consistent about what enables collaboration to succeed: a clear, shared reason to act — often a genuine “burning platform” rather than a nice-to-have; visible senior sponsorship, sustained over time rather than a one-off endorsement; and strong personal relationships that carry a partnership through its difficult moments. Several delegates noted that success builds on itself — early wins create the trust and appetite needed for the next, larger step.

Illustrative examples

- Student records replacement (ONE). A university built a genuine “burning platform” — “we cannot afford to keep going like this” — and convened over twenty colleagues, with every role backfilled with financial commitment.
- Greater Manchester student safety collaboration (ACROSS). “It worked because everyone wanted the same thing,” built on civic commitment and honesty about what couldn't be done.
- Industry investment in facilities (BEYOND). Rolls-Royce's investment in university facilities became self-reinforcing: “others see it and want to join in.”
- Insurance portfolio consolidation (ACROSS). A candid example of collaboration that worked well for purchasing but exposed real limits to trust once it touched shared systems.
- Civic partnership with a local football club (BEYOND). Built on shared values and strong personal relationships, with tangible benefits flowing both ways.

Room by Room

ONE

was the most change fatigued room — change fatigue, scarcity mindset and institutional memory of past failures featured more here than anywhere else.

BEYOND

was the most confident room, with practical rather than emotional barriers — VAT, procurement and data-sharing rules, rather than fear or fatigue.

ACROSS

was fundamentally about sovereignty — barriers clustered around ceding control and institutional autonomy, more than capability or capacity.

Afternoon ideas — the full set

Each room developed a number of concrete ideas in response to the morning's discussion. The full set from across all three rooms is set out below.

ONE — within institutions

Culture change before “it's on fire.”

An idea for building an organisation that is individually and collectively empowered to improve, without needing a crisis to force change.

It calls for permission to fail and consistent behaviour-modelling from senior leaders, though no first step or owner had yet been agreed.

AI to reduce staff workload and support wellbeing

An idea to use AI to take on routine work, freeing staff time for wellbeing, connection and collaboration. It is the smallest and most contained of ONE's ideas, needing leadership focus and cultural trust in the tool more than new investment.

A central student support hub

A proposal to replace fragmented, locally-run student support with a single front door for students. It was the most thoroughly developed idea of the day, tested against governance, data confidentiality and risk as well as design, with a funding model and small early wins suggested as the way in.

A front-facing, customer-focused student space

A proposal for a single, organisationally-agnostic front door for student-facing services. It needs an executive sponsor, proper student journey mapping, and a shift toward customer-service thinking across the institution.

Building a culture of collaboration (post-restructure)

An idea to deliberately build a more collaborative culture across the institution, in the wake of recent organisational restructuring. It depends on breaking down silos and securing a bigger-picture vision, backed by protected time for those leading the change.

Faster, smaller-cycle student feedback

An idea to replace slow, survey-heavy feedback cycles with quicker, more dialogue-based ways of hearing from students. It calls for less governance overhead before feedback can be acted on, and a willingness to move faster than the current year-long cycle allows.

Institutional data quality and governance

A proposal to bring colleagues together around shared data standards and better data governance. It hinges on moving from territorial data ownership to shared accountability, and on a named sponsor with genuine project management capacity.

A professional entry-level apprenticeship (admin/ops)

A sector apprenticeship route into professional services roles, spanning admin, operations and technical functions. It relies on collaboration across teams that don't normally share recruitment or budgets, with a single-function pilot suggested as the place to start.

ACROSS — between institutions

National Student Support Services

A proposal for student wellbeing support organised nationally but delivered locally, potentially with a formal national body role. It was the most developed idea in this room, including a considered first step of building the case around de-risking and reduced regulatory burden rather than mandating change.

An AHEPxAHUA Collaboration Hub

A shared repository of sector collaboration case studies and a practitioner-level toolkit, building on existing UUK and sector reports. Delegates were clear this depends on AHEP and AHUA providing sponsorship and resource, alongside UUK advocacy.

Common student-facing policies

A proposal for a shared set of policies on matters such as withdrawal, tuition fees and conduct, common across UK HEIs. It depends on sector-wide engagement and regulator buy-in, and a shared understanding that inconsistent policy currently works against students.

Peer-to-peer knowledge exchange

A matching mechanism to connect university staff across institutions to share specialist knowledge. It needs people, time and permission to work, alongside a clear framework for how matches are made and bounded.

A sector student records community of practice

A proposed network for student records transformation, deliberately independent of any one technology provider. This idea remained at concept stage, without further detail developed on resourcing or ownership.

BEYOND— beyond the sector

A more commercial mindset in partnerships

An idea to help institutions engage suppliers and external partners with more commercial confidence and negotiating skill. Delegates proposed piloting the approach on a single project first, supported by a proper costing and charging model.

Proving the worth of higher education to the UK economy

A proposal to more deliberately demonstrate and communicate higher education's economic and social value. It calls for a shift in internal culture around how that value is articulated, alongside greater confidence engaging with government and policy.

A storytelling blueprint to sustain collaborations

An idea to use storytelling to evidence the value and impact of partnerships, favouring fewer, higher-quality relationships over many shallow ones. It needs clear metrics and permission to be exploratory, plus a platform for sharing information between partners.

Shared IT services for schools and universities

A proposal for universities to provide digital infrastructure and skills pathways into local schools, such as extending Eduroam or sharing AI skills development. The clearest barrier is regulatory: delegates were explicit that removing the VAT charge currently penalising this kind of shared service is a first ask of Government.

Themes across the afternoon sessions

What would help, generally

Permission, more than money

Very few of the day's ideas were blocked by lack of funding as the primary barrier — far more by the need for someone with existing authority to step back, delegate, or say yes.

Telling the story better

Several ideas exist partly because good collaboration elsewhere in the sector isn't visible enough — a theme that also showed up as a barrier in the morning session.

Protected time

Almost every idea assumes staff and leaders can carve out time beyond their day-to-day role — which itself requires senior backing.

A named sponsor

The ideas that were most fully worked through by delegates were also the ones where a senior sponsor was explicitly identified as needed.

An appetite for shared, sector-level standards

From common student policies to shared IT standards to a common apprenticeship framework, several ideas independently reached for the same solution: a shared reference point instead of every institution solving the same problem alone.

What would specifically be needed from AHEP/AHUA

Sponsorship and resource for the Collaboration Hub

Delegates were explicit that this idea does not get off the ground without AHEP and AHUA committing sponsorship and resource, alongside advocacy from UUK.

Specialist input into the central student support hub

Delegates envisaged AHEP providing the professional services perspective and AHUA the senior leadership perspective, alongside other professional bodies such as BUFDG, to shape training and standards for the hub.

A template to help institutions implement the apprenticeship idea

Delegates suggested AHEP could offer an off-the-peg template setting out how institutions might establish the professional entry-level apprenticeship route, lowering the barrier for individual institutions to act.

Closing note

Our thanks to everyone who contributed across the three rooms.

The ideas above represent only a portion of what was generated over the course of the day, and reflect a sector with no shortage of ambition for working together — within institutions, between them, and beyond.



Contact us at

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