

**Strive Higher**

**Sector Insights Volume Two: Highlighting Innovation in Our Sector**

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## Table of Contents

1.0	Executive Summary .....	3
2.0	Methodology .....	3
3.0	Creating the Conditions for Innovation .....	4
4.0	Improving Services .....	6
4.1	Spotlight on: Imperial's My Imperial Campus App .....	6
4.2	Spotlight on: UAL's Course Support Service .....	7
4.3	Spotlight on: UAL's Library Services Collaborations .....	8
4.4	How we can help: Implementing a Service Approach with the University of East London	8
4.5	Section Conclusion .....	9
5.0	Improving Experiences .....	9
5.1	Spotlight on: University of Reading's Digital Accessibility Campaign .....	9
5.2	Spotlight on: UAL's Student Experience Innovations .....	10
5.3	Spotlight on UAL: Student Co-Creation and Partnership .....	11
5.4	How we can help: Reimagining Disability and Neuroinclusion Services with the University of Surrey .....	11
5.5	Section Conclusion .....	12
6.0	Enhancing Culture .....	13
6.1	Spotlight on University of Leeds, Transforming Research Culture .....	13
6.2	Spotlight on: Newcastle University, Creating a Family-Friendly Institution .....	14
6.3	How we can help: Transforming the Culture with UCL's Campus Experience and Infrastructure Team .....	15
6.4	Section Conclusion .....	16
7.0	Developing Talent .....	16
7.1	Spotlight on: Directorate for the Student Experience (DSE) Future Talent Programme, University of Manchester .....	16
7.2	Spotlight on: Rethinking Technical Services Roles in Higher Education .....	17
7.3	Spotlight on: Diversifying Talent in University Leadership .....	17
7.4	How we can help: Nurturing Diverse Talent Pipelines Through Coaching Initiatives .....	18
7.5	Section Conclusion .....	19
8.0	Future Considerations .....	19
8.1	Artificial Intelligence .....	19
8.2	The Future Campus Experience .....	20
8.3	Section Conclusion .....	21
9.0	Conclusion .....	21
9.1	Key Takeaways .....	22
10.	Acknowledgements .....	23
11.	Strive Higher .....	24

## 1.0 Executive Summary

Hardly a day goes by without a headline on the challenging headwinds facing UK higher education. Funding pressures, changing student demographics, evolving employer expectations, and technological disruption all create a complex landscape for universities to navigate. While these circumstances are undoubtedly affecting our sector, we also see colleagues across all types of institutions using creativity and innovation to respond to these challenges.

But what do we mean by *innovation*?

At its core, innovation represents a spectrum of transformative approaches that range from the radical to the incremental. On one end, innovation can be seen as a disruptive force that fundamentally reimagines existing systems, technologies, or processes. On the other, innovation can be seen as continuous improvement; a more nuanced, steady progression of small, strategic refinements that collectively drive meaningful change. In this report, we deliberately embrace a broad, inclusive definition of innovation that celebrates activities and initiatives across the spectrum.

This report explores how higher education institutions across the UK are fostering innovation across four thematic areas: improving services, improving experiences, enhancing cultures, and developing talent. Through qualitative interviews with 14 individuals from a range of roles and universities, we have identified compelling examples of innovation and the conditions that enable them to flourish.

Our findings reveal that successful innovation in higher education is often characterised by:

- User-centred approaches that place individuals at the heart of solution design,
- Breaking down traditional hierarchies and silos to foster cross-team collaboration,
- Starting with real problems rather than implementing technology for its own sake,
- Iterative development processes that allow for continuous improvement, and
- Strong leadership that balances vision with stakeholder engagement.

The examples highlighted in this report demonstrate that innovation doesn't necessarily require substantial financial investment—although resources certainly help. Rather, the most impactful innovations often stem from a willingness to question established practices, engage meaningfully with users, and create environments where experimentation is encouraged. Above all, they demonstrate that even in challenging times, UK higher education continues to evolve, adapt, and innovate.

As part of Strive Higher's commitment to championing the sector, we offer this report not only to celebrate innovation happening across UK higher education, but also to inspire others to imagine what might be possible in their own institutions.

## 2.0 Methodology

This report is based on qualitative interviews conducted with 14 individuals working across different roles and universities in the UK higher education sector. Participants were selected to represent a diverse range of perspectives, including senior leadership, professional services managers, technical specialists, and innovation leads. This approach allowed us to capture perspectives from strategic decision-makers as well as those directly engaged in the practical aspects of innovation.

Across them, they represent a diverse range of institutions, including research-intensive universities, specialist arts institutions, and post-1992 universities, providing a snapshot of innovation across different types of higher education providers.

Interviews followed a semi-structured format, allowing for consistency in key topics while providing flexibility to explore unique insights from each participant. Each interview lasted approximately 45-60 minutes and covered the following core themes:

- Leadership approaches to fostering innovation,
- Specific examples of innovative projects and their impacts,
- Challenges encountered and how they were overcome, and
- Lessons learned and transferable insights.

Following the interviews, transcripts were analysed to identify key themes, common approaches, and notable examples across four thematic areas: improving services, improving experiences, enhancing culture, and developing talent. The analysis aimed to draw out not just what innovations were implemented, but how they were approached and what factors contributed to their success.

While 14 interviews cannot capture the full breadth of innovation happening across the UK higher education sector, they provide inspirational examples that illustrate how different institutions are responding creatively to common challenges. The examples shared in this report are not meant to be prescriptive but rather to inspire reflection and spark ideas that might be adapted to different institutional contexts.

As qualitative research, this report focuses on depth rather than breadth, seeking to understand the nuanced contexts in which innovation occurs rather than to quantify trends across the sector. The voices and experiences of our participants form the foundation of this report, with their direct quotes and reflections woven throughout to provide authentic insights into the innovation journey.

### 3.0 Creating the Conditions for Innovation

Innovation is not spontaneous; it demands intentional leadership that nurtures creativity and transformation. The most successful approaches to innovation, transformation and change are inherently collaborative, moving far beyond traditional top-down mandates. Meaningful interventions require engagement from across an organisation. Real innovation happens when leaders create spaces for cross-functional teams to identify challenges and develop solution, fostering a sense of shared ownership that transcends hierarchical boundaries.<sup>1</sup>

Courage and strategic vision are essential in this process. The current narrative may lead us to believe we are living through unprecedented times, but higher education institutions are not static entities – they are constantly evolving. As Professor Shân Wareing, Vice Chancellor of Middlesex University noted:

*‘Universities need to embrace the idea that change is inevitable. The University where I work was first formed as a teacher training college, nearly 150 years ago, and it also includes an art college and a technical college in its history. Therefore we’ve gone through transformative change in the past, why would we assume evolution stops here?’*

Leaders must recognise these pivotal moments of potential transformation, as opportunities for innovation and change when environmental factors align in support are fleeting. As Professor

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<sup>1</sup> External link to the Strive Higher website to read the case study: [Executive team development with a post-92 university](#)

Wareing succinctly described it using an analogy from the young adult film, *'Maze Runner'*, these change opportunities are like the rare moments when passages in the maze open up, for relatively low resource outlay. If not run through when open, the opportunity is lost, without commitment of a great deal more effort and resource.

External pressures—whether from economic uncertainty, demographic shifts, regulatory changes, or crises like the COVID-19 pandemic—can accelerate innovation by removing traditional barriers to change. Justin Spooner, Director at Unthinkable, noted that:

*'Innovation moves faster when traditional constraints are removed – and a perceived crisis is very good at allowing us to remove the usual constraints. Right now I am seeing the combination of financial pressures and external market disruptions creating both the necessity and opportunity for more radical approaches than would normally be possible.'*

Successful institutions channel this disruptive energy by developing what Spooner calls an 'animating question'—a compelling challenge that focuses innovation efforts and builds collective momentum. Examples include, 'How might we deliver excellent education at half the current cost?' and 'What would a truly digital-first university look like?'

This doesn't mean universities should take a reactive, crisis-driven approach. Strategic, forward-thinking planning stands in stark contrast to reactive, short-term decision-making. Universities that successfully innovate understand the importance of testing concepts at small scale, maintaining financial contingencies, and avoiding knee-jerk expansions or contractions based on momentary recruitment trends. A critical insight from institutions navigating disruptive change is the need to balance stability with experimentation.

*'Universities need a stable core with highly experimental edges. Not everything can or should change simultaneously, but without substantial innovation at the margins, the core itself becomes vulnerable'*, noted Spooner.

By establishing a robust institutional strategy coupled with a clear vision and purpose, universities are better placed to test ideas and pursue new opportunities as they present themselves.

Effective innovation leadership also demands sophisticated systems thinking. Too often, institutions rely on outdated, disconnected systems driven by short-term fixes rather than long-term strategic planning. According to Professor Wareing,

*'Systems thinking allows you to understand what you're looking at, both as a whole and as component parts, bringing into alignment all the systems of culture, people, money, energy, goals to form a university.'*

By viewing organisations as interconnected ecosystems, leaders can identify critical leverage points for meaningful change. This approach requires comprehensive discovery phases, understanding underlying challenges before implementing transformative strategies.

Resistance is an inevitable companion to innovation, but exceptional leaders do not view this as an obstacle. Instead, they create constructive engagement opportunities that allow critics to shape implementation processes. By gathering comprehensive feedback, leveraging evidence-based insights, and iteratively refining approaches, leaders can build broader institutional consensus and support for more sustainable transformations.

Coupled with this is the concept of agency. People do not inherently resist change; they resist having change imposed upon them. Leaders who create environments where staff and students can actively contribute to shaping innovations report significantly higher engagement and more

sustainable outcomes. By offering choices and restoring a sense of control, leaders transform potential resistance into collaborative momentum.

Ultimately, innovation in higher education is about stewardship. Professor Wareing notes that,

*‘We inherit institutions, and our role is to pass them on, if at all possible, in better shape than we found them’.*

This requires a delicate balance of vision, courage, systemic understanding, and genuine collaboration.

## 4.0 Improving Services

The administrative infrastructure of universities often reflects decades of organic growth, with services added incrementally over time without a comprehensive strategic vision. This organic development has resulted in complex, sometimes fragmented administrative ecosystems that have grown more through necessity and institutional adaptation than through deliberate design. Innovative approaches to service delivery are now emerging as powerful mechanisms for addressing these long-standing operational challenges, reducing administrative burdens, and creating more responsive and supportive institutional environments.

Universities are increasingly recognising that services are not simply background functions, but integral components of the staff and student experience. Innovative service design goes far beyond traditional process improvements, seeking to fundamentally reimagine how institutions support both students and staff. By strategically addressing operational inefficiencies, universities can simultaneously alleviate administrative workloads, enhance student experiences, and create more agile and responsive institutional structures that enable academic staff to focus more deeply on teaching and research.

The following examples illustrate how innovative approaches to reimagining services can dramatically reshape institutional capabilities, creating more supportive, efficient, and responsive services that directly contribute to the quality of staff and student experiences.

### 4.1 Spotlight on: Imperial’s *My Imperial Campus* App

In response to student feedback about difficulties navigating campus services and events, Imperial developed a mobile app that has transformed how students interact with the institution. What distinguishes this initiative is that it was driven by the ‘Dream Team’ – an in-house design consultancy, comprised of Imperial students, alumni and academics and bringing together IT specialists and service providers in a collaborative process.

The app focused on solving real problems identified by students, including:

- Campus navigation, particularly for new students unfamiliar with the complex layout,
- Event discovery across numerous departments and student societies,
- Attendance tracking for both academic and co-curricular activities, and
- Access to personalised timetables and study resources.

The development process was deliberately iterative, with regular user testing and feedback cycles. This approach allowed the team to continuously refine features based on actual usage patterns rather than assumptions about student needs. Head of Digital Campus Product Line, Rob Sherwood, noted,

*'We aimed to release early and often, gathering data on what features students actually used rather than what we thought they would use.'*

A particularly innovative aspect of the app is its personalisation engine, which learned from user behaviour to highlight relevant events and resources. This capability drives ongoing engagement, with students reporting that the app helped them discover opportunities they would otherwise have missed.

The metrics speak to the app's success: despite minimal marketing, it now boasts around 9,000 active users (representing approximately 30% of the student population). More importantly, roughly 85% of those students are using the app at least three times per week, indicating that it had become an integral part of their campus experience.

As Portfolio Manager, Andrew Bottomley summarised,

*'The app was designed with students, for students, ensuring we had a clear mandate. We weren't creating something we thought students should use; and we were testing hypothesis for new features in an agile way.'*

## 4.2 Spotlight on: UAL's Course Support Service

The University of the Arts London (UAL) made a significant strategic investment to centralise administrative support for academic courses. This initiative responded to a persistent challenge in higher education: the administrative burden on academic staff that diverts time and energy from teaching and research.

The restructuring created approximately 50 FTE staff positions dedicated to course administration, relieving academic staff of 171 identified administrative tasks. These ranged from attendance tracking, HPL contracting, timetabling and room bookings to assessment administration and external examiner coordination.

The benefits have included:

- Academic staff reported an increase in hours per week for teaching preparation, student support, and research activities,
- Administrative processes became more consistent and efficient, reducing errors and delays,
- Students benefited from improved organisation and communication, and
- National Student Survey scores for course organisation and management have increased.

What made this service innovation particularly successful was the careful mapping of processes and the establishment of a service catalogue with clear delineation of roles and responsibilities. A comprehensive audit identified administrative tasks that could be centralised without losing the contextual knowledge essential for effective support.

As Director of Library and Student Support Services, Juliette Sargeant, noted,

*'The creation of a consistent and accessible course support structure putting students and academic staff at the heart of the service was made possible through excellent cross university collaboration, strong communication and clarity of the strategic case for change.'*

### 4.3 Spotlight on: UAL's Library Services Collaborations

UAL has reconceptualised traditional library services to better meet evolving student needs. Recognising that students sometimes do not distinguish between library and IT support requirements, UAL Libraries and IT Services piloted a Collaborative Enquires initiative enabling library staff to handle a range of basic IT issues, creating a truly integrated support service. This approach allows students to resolve basic IT issues in the library, reducing IT email enquiry and response wait times. Library staff were able to support students at their point of need with minor IT tasks like resetting passwords and WIFI support, while IT staff were freed up to focus on more complex technical issues. This cross-team Collaborative Enquiry system has helped students resolve basic support needs through a single interaction, improving efficiency and satisfaction.

UAL has also expanded a 'Library of Things' concept, moving beyond traditional book lending to include laptops, chargers, specialised tools, and even less conventional items like bike repair kits and library furniture. This expansion responds to the diverse resource needs of students, particularly in creative disciplines where access to equipment can be a significant barrier. That said, this isn't just about absorbing new tasks and jobs; as Juliette Sargeant, Director of Library and Student Support Services notes,

*'It's about thinking how services evolve, and more importantly, working alongside other teams at the university to collaborate where we can'.*

### 4.4 How we can help: Implementing a Service Approach with the University of East London

The University of East London (UEL) engaged Strive Higher to support a transformative approach to service delivery, addressing challenges in service consistency, ownership, and continuous improvement. What makes this initiative noteworthy is its collaborative methodology that built capacity from within rather than imposing solutions externally.

UEL was midway through implementing their Vision 2028 strategic plan when they recognised the need for a step change in their service approach. To stabilise operations while simultaneously streamlining services and accelerating progress, they partnered with Strive Higher to develop a comprehensive service catalogue—establishing clear service scope, ownership, deployment models, and performance measures.

The service catalogue was developed collaboratively, empowering those delivering services to be fully involved rather than defaulting to a top-down implementation. This approach ensured the service framework would be embedded with the broadest possible skills base to support sustainable implementation.

The approach to service transformation, facilitated by Strive Higher at UEL, included several innovative components:

- Extensive stakeholder engagement involving senior leaders, service owners, subject matter experts, and service users to capture the existing landscape,
- Co-created workshops led by Strive Higher covering key themes including service culture principles, change management, community building, and performance measurement, and sustainability,
- Development of a dedicated community of practice to share approaches, experiences, and break down operational silos,
- Creation of a high-level service map to identify process improvements and future opportunities, and



- A comprehensive toolkit, designed with Strive Higher, providing frameworks, templates, and training materials to support wider adoption.

The impact has been substantial, with improvements in service consistency, cross-functional collaboration, and user experience. This project also won the 'Change and Project Partnership (Public Sector) category at the Change Awards 2025.<sup>2</sup> Describing the experience of working with Strive Higher, Niamh Godley, Director of Change and Improvement noted:

*'The Strive Higher team got to the heart of the challenge quickly and developed a service catalogue approach collaboratively, adapting to our needs. They brought together a cross-University community empowering them to adopt this new way of working with great outcomes.'*

## 4.5 Section Conclusion

The most compelling service innovations emerge from a holistic understanding of institutional ecosystems, carefully integrating technological solutions, process redesign, and user-centred approaches. These transformative approaches recognise that effective service delivery is not about implementing structures or technology for their own sake, but about creating streamlined, accessible, and intuitive services that meet the complex and evolving needs of diverse institutional stakeholders. Successful innovations demonstrate the potential to break down organisational silos, reduce bureaucracy, and create more connected and efficient educational environments.

By embracing creative approaches to service design and delivery, universities are discovering new pathways to operational excellence.

## 5.0 Improving Experiences

Innovation is often driven by a commitment to reimagine experiences. This involves fundamentally rethinking how institutions serve, support, and empower the communities they serve. The most meaningful innovations emerge from a deep understanding of stakeholder needs, a willingness to challenge existing systems, and a collaborative approach that places individuals at the centre of the experience.

External pressures—including changing workforce demands, technological shifts, and evolving student expectations—are compelling universities to adapt and reimagine their approach to education. However, the most successful innovations are not merely reactive, but proactive strategies that emerge from careful research, user engagement, and a commitment to continuous improvement. Universities are increasingly recognising that true innovation requires more than incremental changes; it demands a holistic rethinking of educational delivery, support systems, and student engagement.

The following examples illustrate how innovative approaches can transform institutional practices, creating more responsive, engaging, and effective educational experiences that truly support student success.

### 5.1 Spotlight on: University of Reading's Digital Accessibility Campaign

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<sup>2</sup> External link to the [Change Awards website](#).

The University of Reading's 'Look Again' digital accessibility campaign demonstrates how innovative approaches to communication can drive institutional change. Launched in May 2023 to coincide with Global Accessibility Awareness Day, this initiative aimed to transform how staff understood and implemented digital accessibility requirements.

The campaign took a multi-faceted approach, including:

- Visual materials (posters, stickers, digital banners) featuring eye-catching designs and clear messaging,
- Training sessions tailored to different roles and technical competencies,
- Themed articles in university publications highlighting personal stories and practical guidance,
- An interactive quiz that helped staff assess their understanding of accessibility and identify areas for improvement, and
- A dedicated resource hub providing templates, tools, and guidance documents.

What distinguished this campaign from routine compliance initiatives was its emphasis on personal impact. Instead of focusing solely on legal requirements, the materials highlighted how accessible design benefits real people. This approach was inspired by a staff member with colour vision deficiency (colour blindness) whose experience led to practical changes in the university's coding systems.

The campaign coincided with a significant institutional transition, as Reading moved from a three-term to a two-semester academic structure. This timing allowed accessibility considerations to be embedded in the redesign of course materials and digital resources, ensuring that new content met accessibility standards from the outset rather than requiring retrospective adjustment.

The impact metrics are impressive: awareness of digital accessibility requirements increased from 75% to 87% among staff, while participation in related training rose from 37% to 41%. More people were engaging with accessibility resources and demand for training sessions increased.

When asked what advice she would give to other universities looking to launch similar initiatives, Digital Accessibility Officer, Dr. Tharindu Liyanagunawardena, noted,

*'Passion is key. If you're just running a campaign to be compliant, people will sense that. Also, accessibility can be quite technical, so it's important to translate it into practical terms that everyone can understand. If you start by throwing around jargon like "alt text" and "ARIA labels," you'll lose people. Instead, show them the real-world impact accessibility has on individuals'.*

## 5.2 Spotlight on: UAL's Student Experience Innovations

UAL has taken a holistic approach to student experience innovation, implementing a series of interconnected initiatives that address accessibility, study, and social dimensions of campus life. These innovations share a common focus on fostering belonging and supporting well-being—key factors in student retention and success.

Recognising that many students, particularly those from underrepresented backgrounds, struggled to develop a sense of belonging at university, the Photo Voice Project was launched by Academic Support and Library Services at London College of Communication, one of UAL's colleges. The project is a participatory photography initiative with first-year undergraduate students invited to capture images representing their experiences and perceptions of university life, with these photos then displayed in exhibitions within the library.

This seemingly simple intervention had profound effects on students' sense of belonging and engagement, encouraging students to interact with each other and share experiences through the medium of photography. Students reported on the exhibitions improving their sense of representation and belonging in Library spaces.

Perhaps one of the most impactful innovations in support of the student experience involved a radical simplification of disability support processes. In June 2023, UAL launched a three-year change programme aimed at eliminating the requirement for students seeking disability accommodation to provide medical evidence up front—obtaining evidence was often a barrier to accessing support.

This change enabled students to access support more quickly – there was a one-third increase in students accessing support and adjustments during the autumn term. This should help students to succeed and stay on their courses. And while the change initially increased workloads for support staff, it also reduced the number of students requiring referrals for full diagnostic assessments. On the whole, support staff generally considered the change to be the ethically right thing to do, improving outcomes for both students and the institution.

### 5.3 Spotlight on UAL: Student Co-Creation and Partnership

A significant cultural shift in UK higher education involves reconceptualising students not merely as consumers of education but as partners in its creation and delivery. UAL exemplifies this approach through its Collaborative Challenge Unit for postgraduate students at the London College of Fashion (LCF).

This initiative is a 'win-win' approach where students gain valuable educational experiences while contributing to real university improvements. On this shared unit of study, multidisciplinary postgraduate student teams are matched with real institutional challenges, bringing fresh perspectives and specialised skills to real-world problems ranging from space utilisation to digital engagement.

One successful project involved redesigning the LCF Materials and Products Library, a specialist resource collection for the new Stratford campus. The student team conducted user research, prototyped solutions, and implemented solutions to help improve the utilisation of the space as well as highlighting how and where other students could make more sustainable choices in their work. For the students, the project provided authentic professional experience and portfolio material; for the institution, it delivered user-centred solutions that staff alone might not have developed.

As Director of Library and Student Support Services, Juliette Sargeant observed,

*'Co-creation with students leads to more meaningful, impactful changes. They bring insights we simply don't have, challenging our assumptions and helping us avoid solutions that look good on paper but don't match actual student needs.'*

### 5.4 How we can help: Reimagining Disability and Neuroinclusion Services with the University of Surrey

The University of Surrey (UoS) engaged Strive Higher to undertake a comprehensive review of their Disability and Neuroinclusion Services (D&N), addressing operational challenges while identifying opportunities for sustainable improvement. What makes this initiative noteworthy is its

focus on developing a future operating model that balances service quality with long-term sustainability.

UoS's D&N service had experienced personnel changes while simultaneously pursuing improved service quality. Against a backdrop of increasing pressure across the higher education sector and growing awareness around disability and mental health issues, the service faced mounting support requests. UoS partnered with Strive Higher to find a sustainable way forward that would maintain and enhance support quality while managing increasing demand.

Following a thorough review of the existing service provision, Strive Higher recommended a holistic transformation approach: defining a clear service strategy, refreshing policies and processes, and strengthening relationships across the University, all supported by a target culture and continuous improvement methodology. Central to this approach was the adoption of the social model of disability as the foundation for service design principles.

The approach to service transformation included several components:

- Co-creation workshops led by Strive Higher with stakeholders across UoS to design the future state of the student-facing service,
- Establishment of safe spaces for sharing approaches and experiences to break down institutional silos,
- Collaborative development of service possibilities that could realistically meet future needs,
- Creation of a detailed implementation roadmap with embedded continuous service improvement mechanisms,
- Development of a target culture framework to guide service behaviours and tone.

The University of Surrey demonstrates how universities can proactively respond to increasing service demands while maintaining quality and sustainability through strategic redesign rather than incremental adjustments. Commenting on the experience of working with Strive Higher, Interim Director of Student Life, Laura Smythson, noted,

*'Strive Higher worked with The University of Surrey Disability and Neuroinclusion department in a truly consultative fashion. They led the review in a creative and compassionate manner, directing with a deep understanding of sector excellence and an awareness of the need for care during a time of change. Co-creation was at the forefront and with the clear outcome to achieve a roadmap of a revised service provision, continuous improvement approach, Strive Higher have allowed us to begin the transition to a modern disability provision'.*

## 5.5 Section Conclusion

Innovation in higher education transcends technological processes. It is about creating more accessible, personalised, and responsive learning environments that address real, measurable challenges faced by students. Successful innovations are characterised by their ability leverage existing resources creatively and develop solutions that are deeply aligned with the actual needs and experiences of everyone. This approach requires institutions to move beyond assumptions, actively involve students in the design process, and embrace an iterative methodology that allows for rapid testing, learning, and refinement.

By prioritising user-centred design, collaborative development, and a willingness to experiment, universities are discovering new pathways to enhance experiences.

## 6.0 Enhancing Culture

Beyond services and experiences, the foundation of sustainable innovation in higher education lies in institutional culture itself. The most forward-thinking universities recognise that isolated innovation initiatives, however well-designed, cannot create lasting transformation without addressing the underlying cultural frameworks and norms that shape institutional behaviour. These institutions are meaningfully engaged in reimagining organisational values, structures, and practices to cultivate environments where innovation leads to sustainable improvements to culture, ways of working and common purpose.

In recent years, we have also seen a renewed focus on enhancing research culture, with universities adopting proactive approaches to create more inclusive, supportive, and ethical research environments. By reimagining research practices, recognition systems, and collaborative frameworks, these institutions are fostering more diverse participation in research, enabling more innovative methodologies, and ultimately producing more impactful and socially relevant research outcomes.

Traditional hierarchies and structures, with narrowly defined roles, siloed departments, and established power structures, increasingly appear as a barrier to the collaborative, agile approaches required in today's higher education sector. Forward-thinking institutions are dismantling rigid boundaries between teaching, research, technical, and professional staff, recognising the value that more fluid, inclusive organisational structures help to create. This cultural shift acknowledges that the most powerful innovations emerge at the intersection of diverse perspectives, expertise, and experiences.

These examples demonstrate how fundamental shifts in institutional mindsets can catalyse broader cultural transformation.

### 6.1 Spotlight on University of Leeds, Transforming Research Culture

The University of Leeds has pioneered a comprehensive and holistic approach to enhancing research culture, addressing systemic challenges including workload pressures, competitive practices, and inclusivity barriers. What distinguishes Leeds' approach is its university-wide commitment to improving research culture rather than isolated interventions.

Leeds proactively responded to the findings of the 2020 Wellcome survey that revealed concerning practices in research cultures across the sector, including: hyper-competition, entrenched hierarchies, precarious employment, and exclusionary practices disproportionately affecting researchers of particular profiles. Wellcome's *Reimagining Research* conference in 2021 confirmed the pervasiveness of these issues.

In the same year, Leeds created the Dean for Research Culture role. Then, when Research England allocated substantial funding for research culture initiatives, Leeds strategically deployed these resources as catalysts for meaningful change. The university established interconnected working groups addressing open research, EDI, research integrity, and researcher development, and ran a reanalysis of data from the entire research community via *The Big Leeds Conversation*, all culminating in the launch of the first Research Culture Strategy in 2023.<sup>3</sup>

Leeds' approach stands out for several innovative elements:

- Transparent governance structures with genuine representation from all career stages and research backgrounds,

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<sup>3</sup> External link to University of Leeds: [Research Culture Strategy](#)

- Regular Culture Cafés providing informal forums for surfacing challenges and co-creating solutions,
- A thought-leadership podcast series – Research Culture Uncovered - featuring researchers sharing lived experiences and emerging best practices, <sup>4</sup>
- Interactive webinars tackling specific aspects of research culture with actionable takeaways,
- A distributed network of research culture 'ambassadors' who demonstrate tangible benefits across disciplines, and
- Pioneering the integration of research culture metrics into funding allocations and promotion criteria,
- An embodiment of good research culture through experimental projects run by the central team, including random allocation of funding, positive action, and inclusive recruitment. <sup>5</sup>

The impact has been transformative, with measurable improvements in open research practices, recognition of diversified research activities, and professional development across the career span. Perhaps most significantly, as Professor Catherine Davies, Dean of Research Culture noted:

*'Research culture is now embedded in conversations about research excellence. We've moved beyond seeing these as separate or even opposing concerns. We see greater diversity on committees, more inclusive hiring practices, and increased external investment in research culture projects. Small experimental trials—like pre-releasing interview questions to reduce bias—have been scaled up across faculties'.*

## 6.2 Spotlight on: Newcastle University, Creating a Family-Friendly Institution

Newcastle University's three-year 'For Families Project' demonstrates how cultural innovation can address gaps in support for working parents and carers—groups often overlooked in institutional policies. The project took a holistic approach, examining every aspect of university life through the lens of family responsibilities.

The initiative began with a comprehensive review of existing policies, revealing that many contained hidden barriers such as length-of-service requirements for family leave. By removing these restrictions and enhancing provisions—including extending paternity leave to four weeks and adding specific support for parents of premature babies—the university signalled its commitment to genuine inclusivity.

A key innovation was the attention to language and accessibility in policy documents. Technical jargon was replaced with clear explanations, and policies were restructured to address diverse family situations, including same-sex parents, single parents, and those with caring responsibilities for adults.

Despite significant space constraints on campus, the project secured dedicated facilities including private nursing rooms. This required creative repurposing of existing areas and careful consultation with users to ensure the facilities met genuine needs.

The project also developed intersectional initiatives to support specific groups, including parents of neurodivergent children and single parents from minority ethnic backgrounds. These targeted interventions addressed overlapping challenges that general policies often miss. The cultural impact extends beyond the specific policies to a broader normalisation of family discussions in

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<sup>4</sup> External link: [Research Culture Uncovered podcast](#)

<sup>5</sup> External link to University of Leeds: [Sharing Practice](#)

professional contexts. Staff report feeling more comfortable discussing caring responsibilities with managers and colleagues, reducing the pressure to compartmentalise personal and professional identities.

As EDI Advisor, Eleanor Farrington emphasised for those considering similar initiatives,

*‘Consult with those who have lived experiences. Policies should reflect real needs, not just best practices from other institutions. We found that seemingly small details—like the location of nursing rooms or the timing of key meetings—could make enormous differences to people’s daily experiences.’*

### 6.3 How we can help: Transforming the Culture with UCL’s Campus Experience and Infrastructure Team

UCL engaged Strive Higher to support their Campus Experience & Infrastructure (CE&I) Team, a directorate comprising approximately 350 staff spread across the UCL estate. In 2021, as UCL prepared to welcome students and colleagues back to campus post-COVID, the Executive Director of Operations commissioned Strive Higher to address emerging challenges. The CE&I team was experiencing a sense of disempowerment and fragmentation following the pandemic disruption. Additionally, the directorate needed to align with the newly appointed Provost’s vision of making UCL’s campus experience a prominent selling point for the University.

Strive Higher implemented a collaborative approach that prioritised staff voice and involvement throughout the transformation process. Working closely with the department’s leadership team and Culture Champions, we facilitated a comprehensive cultural assessment and renewal initiative.

The approach included:

- Extensive focus groups with all teams to reach a collective understanding of both the current and target culture states,
- A compassionate methodology that created space for staff to have their voices heard during a challenging transition period,
- Development of an evidence-based gap analysis with actionable recommendations for leadership,
- Coordination of culture and behaviours workshops attended by stakeholders across the department,
- Establishment of shared behavioural pledges that colleagues made to one another to foster the desired culture, and
- Deployment of coaching expertise to support individuals and teams in understanding and embracing new ways of working.

Upon completion, the team had a clear, consistent and compelling vision for the target culture supported by a co-created set of preferred behaviours. On the experience of working with Strive Higher, Executive Director of Operations, Ian Dancy, noted:

*‘It was great working with Strive Higher. From day one, they understood the challenge and supported me and the wider team to keep focused on what we were trying to achieve. Numerous people fed back to me that Strive Higher made themselves available to talk about small personal stories (of culture) which I think collectively helped them understand what we were trying to develop. They were great value for money and ultimately have helped us move our culture forward in a positive direction.’*

## 6.4 Section Conclusion

By reimagining organisational structures, engagement strategies, and recognition systems, universities are creating more inclusive, responsive, and innovative cultures that can continuously adapt to evolving needs and opportunities. These examples illustrate that the most profound innovations in higher education may not be specific technologies or services, but rather the cultural frameworks that enable continuous, collaborative improvement.

## 7.0 Developing Talent

The complexity of today's higher education environment demands a more intentional, inclusive approach to developing talent within our sector. Innovative talent development strategies recognise that professional services staff, often overlooked in traditional advancement frameworks, play essential roles in institutional success and require dedicated pathways for growth and leadership development. Similarly, universities are acknowledging the imperative of diversity in leadership, implementing initiatives to address underrepresentation and create more inclusive advancement opportunities. These approaches reflect a fundamental shift from viewing talent development as an individual responsibility to recognising it as an institutional imperative.

Particularly transformative are programmes that integrate real-world institutional challenges with professional development, creating dual benefits for individuals and the organisation. By structuring talent development around actual business needs and operational improvements, innovative universities simultaneously advance individual careers and organisational capabilities. These approaches often transcend traditional departmental boundaries, encouraging cross-functional collaboration and a more integrated institutional perspective among participants. Moreover, leading institutions are increasingly employing evidence-based methodologies, collecting comprehensive data on representation, career progression, and development outcomes to guide strategic interventions.

The following examples illustrate how innovative talent development initiatives can catalyse both individual and institutional transformation.

### 7.1 Spotlight on: Directorate for the Student Experience (DSE) Future Talent Programme, University of Manchester

The University of Manchester has created a comprehensive Future Talent Programme targeting mid-level professional services staff working within the DSE (grades 4 & 5). This annual programme runs from October to June, providing structured development opportunities without removing participants from their substantive roles.

The programme centres on real-life DSE projects sponsored by senior staff. These projects address genuine institutional challenges while providing participants with opportunities to develop and demonstrate new skills. Recent examples include improving the postgraduate application process, enhancing internal communications, and developing sustainability initiatives.

Complementing the project work are workshops covering essential professional skills including project management, report writing, data analysis, and presentation techniques. These sessions are deliberately practical, with participants applying the skills directly to their project work.

As Administration and Project Officer Mira Hall explained,



*‘The programme helps unify a large, diverse directorate by encouraging cross-team collaboration and communication. Participants develop networks across departmental boundaries that continue long after the formal programme ends.’*

A distinctive feature is the visibility it provides to talented staff who might otherwise remain under the radar. Participants present their project outcomes to senior colleagues within the DSE, creating opportunities for recognition and advancement with some having been promoted, or taking a sideways move to expand their career development, since completing the programme.

The initiative has evolved based on participant feedback, with refinements including earlier project assignment, and enhanced information for line managers. This responsive approach has contributed to its sustainability, with the programme now in its ninth successful iteration.

## 7.2 Spotlight on: Rethinking Technical Services Roles in Higher Education

Higher education has traditionally maintained clear distinctions between academic, technical, and professional services staff, often with implicit hierarchies that can inhibit collaboration and innovation. Several institutions are now deliberately blurring these boundaries to create more integrated approaches to educational delivery.

Innovative universities are pioneering a ‘technical tutor’ model that recognises the educational contribution of technical staff. Rather than being positioned solely as support services, technicians are engaged as partners in academic delivery, bringing specialised expertise that complements academic teaching. This approach has been particularly effective in practice-based disciplines like design, performing arts, and laboratory sciences.

As Head of Technical and Westminster’s DCDI school, Abid Qayum, explained,

*‘The distinction between technicians, academics, and professional services is increasingly blurred. Our technical staff often have industry experience and practical knowledge that’s invaluable to students, but traditional structures didn’t always recognise or reward that contribution.’*

This cultural shift extends to professional recognition beyond traditional academic roles. Several institutions have created parallel progression routes for technical specialists, allowing them to advance based on expertise rather than having to move into management or academic positions. These pathways include specialised professional development, recognition schemes, and revised promotion criteria that value technical innovation.

*‘By recognising and rewarding technical expertise on its own terms, we’re not just improving retention of skilled staff—we’re creating conditions where technical innovation is valued as highly as academic or administrative innovation’,* noted Qayum.

## 7.3 Spotlight on: Diversifying Talent in University Leadership

Work led by Academic Registrar and Director of Student and Academic Services, Dr Monika Nangia, at Durham University and supported by Gatenby Sanderson addresses a persistent challenge in higher education: underrepresentation of certain groups in professional services leadership. What distinguishes this initiative is its two-pronged approach combining data analysis with powerful personal narratives, or ‘storytelling’.

The data collection strand focuses on improving the availability of data to aid benchmarking of diversity in leadership roles across the sector. Dr Nangia has collaborated with sector bodies

including HESA and Advance HE to advocate for mandatory data collection that would allow more effective tracking and comparison. To date, this work has revealed significant disparities, particularly in institutions outside major metropolitan areas.

As Dr Nangia observed,

*'We can't address what we don't measure. The current voluntary approach to diversity data leaves significant gaps in our understanding, making it difficult to target interventions effectively.'*

Complementing this quantitative work is an innovative storytelling approach that brings representation issues to life for decision-makers. By presenting personal narratives to university governing bodies and councils, the initiative has transformed abstract statistics into compelling human stories that drive action.

Practical interventions include targeted professional development programmes, mentoring schemes that connect underrepresented staff with senior leaders, and inclusive recruitment strategies such as diverse interview panels and skills-based assessment techniques.

The initiative has paid particular attention to regional disparities in diversity and their implications for talent development. As Dr Nangia summarised,

*'If you can see it, you can be it. In regions with less diversity, creating visible role models and pathways becomes even more crucial for nurturing talent from all backgrounds.'*

#### 7.4 How we can help: Nurturing Diverse Talent Pipelines Through Coaching Initiatives

Strive Higher launched a series of initiatives aimed at addressing talent development challenges in higher education, with a specific focus on supporting individuals from underrepresented groups.

In 2023, Strive Higher convened roundtable discussions with OD and EDI Directors from UCL, King's College London, University of Nottingham, Queen Mary University of London, University of London, and Bournemouth University.

Subsequently, Strive Higher engaged with Estates Directors from LSE, UCL, University of Kent, University of London, Queen Mary University of London, and University of Nottingham to address similar challenges within estates divisions.

These roundtables highlighted the importance of building diverse teams, senior leadership commitment, setting clear expectations for inclusive leadership, and creating development opportunities now rather than waiting for change.

In response to insights gained from these events, Strive Higher implemented two innovative coaching programmes:

- 'Space to Lead': A cross-institutional cohort of 12 individuals from estates and facilities management services
- 'Inclusive Futures': A programme supporting 16 individuals working within internal cohorts across 4 universities

Both programmes were provided at no cost to participants or universities, reflecting our commitment to sector capacity building. A mid-point review of the Space to Lead pilot revealed significant impacts:

- Transformational coaching experiences boosting confidence and accelerating development,
- Identification of challenges in engaging diverse talent requiring greater intentionality,
- Recognition of underinvestment in leadership development for estates and facilities teams in particular, and
- Acknowledgment that sector-wide collaboration is essential for sustainable change.

The impact has been noteworthy, with some participants already advancing into new roles and others demonstrating increased confidence as noted by their line managers. Strive Higher's ongoing commitment includes considering expansion of programme access, creating conditions for institutional change, and strengthening partnerships with sector bodies.

This initiative exemplifies how targeted interventions can address systemic challenges in developing diverse talent pipelines through collaborative approaches rather than isolated efforts.

## 7.5 Section Conclusion

By reimagining leadership pathways, creating more inclusive advancement opportunities, implementing experiential learning approaches, and fostering cross-functional collaboration, universities are developing more robust talent ecosystems that enhance institutional capabilities while creating more fulfilling professional environments. These examples demonstrate that investing in talent through innovative development frameworks yields benefits that extend far beyond individual career advancement to influence the entire institution and our sector more broadly.

## 8.0 Future Considerations

Discussions on innovation often focus the mind on an imagined, future state. As we consider the future of higher education, two interconnected developments have the potential to fundamentally reshape the university experience: the rapid advancement of artificial intelligence (AI) and the evolution of campus environments. These developments represent not merely technological shifts but transformative changes that will redefine how institutions deliver education, support students and staff, and fulfil their broader civic missions.

The integration of these innovations requires a delicate balance—embracing the transformative potential they offer while remaining anchored to the core values and human-centred approaches that define high quality educational experiences.<sup>6</sup> Universities that approach these challenges thoughtfully, with strategic vision and collaborative mindsets, will be best positioned to thrive in this new landscape. In this final section of our report, we explore how forward-thinking institutions are navigating these complex waters.

### 8.1 Artificial Intelligence

AI is rapidly transforming higher education, with applications ranging from administrative efficiency to enhanced student support. Early applications focus on reducing student dropout rates by identifying patterns of disengagement before they lead to withdrawal. By analysing data from multiple systems—including library usage, virtual learning environment engagement, and

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<sup>6</sup> External link to Strive Higher website for the insight piece: [Soft skills: what are they good for with the rise of the robots?](#)

attendance records—these tools can flag potential issues for personal follow-up by support staff. This work in itself is no longer cutting edge, but the opportunities to enhance, streamline and accelerate these activities have the potential to transform both the staff and the student experience.

As Future of Work Architect, Gary Walker, explained,

*‘AI has the potential to enhance student support services by addressing social isolation and administrative inefficiencies. The technology allows us to be more proactive and personalised in our interventions, reaching students before small issues become major problems.’*

Some universities have also begun using AI to streamline information retrieval and administrative processes. Chatbots and virtual assistants provide 24/7 responses to common queries, while automated workflows reduce processing times for routine transactions. These applications free up professional service staff to focus on complex cases requiring human judgment and interpersonal skills.

It can seem overwhelming, but Walker recommends a pragmatic approach: starting small with tools universities likely already have, for example Microsoft 365 and Copilot, rather than developing bespoke systems. This approach allows universities to experiment and build capability and confidence while managing costs and risks.

Some of the world’s top universities have made significant headway harnessing AI-powered innovations for commercial potential, particularly in areas like language learning, research data analysis, and personalised learning materials. These initiatives often involve partnerships with technology companies, creating new revenue streams while addressing genuine educational and social needs, but as Director of Unthinkable, Justin Spooner, noted:

*‘Innovation can and should be distributed across the sector, rather than concentrated in elite institutions – there is a lot of democratisation of access and increased customisability happening now’.*

The sheer scale and complexity of AI – not to mention the ethical considerations –has left many universities struggling to keep up with, let alone ahead of, the curve. Those universities who aren’t yet seriously considering the impact AI will have on their students, people, operating models, and service catalogues would do well to do so immediately.

The challenge remains balancing AI innovation with ethical considerations and governance mechanisms. Leading institutions are developing comprehensive AI policies that address issues including data privacy, algorithmic bias, and appropriate human oversight.

*‘The question isn’t whether to adopt AI, but how to do so in ways that align with your values and enhance rather than undermine your educational mission.’*, noted Walker.

## 8.2 The Future Campus Experience

The continued evolution of physical and digital campus experiences represents another significant shift in recent times. The Covid-19 pandemic accelerated the integration of physical and digital modalities, and this hybrid approach is now becoming the norm rather than an emergency

response. Many universities are having to rethink traditional concepts of ‘space and place’ while also working to instil a sense of belonging across increasingly disparate student cohorts.<sup>7</sup>

Students increasingly expect personalised learning and support that adapts to their individual circumstances and preferences. This expectation extends beyond academic content to encompass administrative services, community engagement, and well-being support.

The role of professional and technical staff is shifting accordingly, with greater emphasis on digital literacy, user experience design, and data-informed decision making. Traditional boundaries between academic and support functions are becoming less relevant as collaborative, multidisciplinary approaches become the norm.

Agile approaches to institutional change are gaining traction, with universities needing to adopt methodologies from the technology sector to increase responsiveness and reduce the risk of large-scale project failures. These approaches emphasise iterative development, user testing, and cross-functional teams—enabling more rapid adaptation to changing circumstances.

A final insight concerns the importance of looking beyond the higher education sector for inspiration and lessons already learned so as not to repeat mistakes. Spooner noted that,

*‘Universities can learn from other sectors that have already navigated or are navigating similar transitions. Financial services, retail, and healthcare all offer valuable lessons in digital transformation and customer experience that universities can adapt to their context.’*

### 8.3 Section Conclusion

The future considerations explored in this section demonstrate the complex nature of innovation in higher education. These developments aren't isolated phenomena but interconnected forces that collectively reshape how universities operate, educate, and create value in a rapidly changing world.

Universities that approach these future considerations strategically, with intentional governance and ethics frameworks and a willingness to learn from other sectors, will be better positioned to harness their potential benefits while mitigating associated risks. The path forward requires both pragmatism and vision: starting with manageable initiatives while maintaining sight of the broader transformative possibilities these innovations offer for students, staff, and society as a whole.

## 9.0 Conclusion

The examples of innovation highlighted in this report demonstrate the remarkable resilience and adaptability of UK universities in the face of significant headwinds. Through thoughtful leadership, user-centred approaches, and a willingness to reimagine traditional structures and practices, universities are finding creative ways to enhance student and staff experiences, improve service delivery, transform institutional cultures, and develop talent.

Several common themes emerge across the innovations we have highlighted:

### User-Centred Approaches

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<sup>7</sup> Insight piece: [What is ‘belonging’ and why does it matter?](#)

The most impactful initiatives begin with genuine understanding of user needs rather than predetermined solutions. Whether through student co-creation, staff consultation, or data-driven insights, successful innovations address real problems experienced by real people.

### Breaking Down Traditional Silos

Innovation thrives when traditional boundaries—between academic and professional services, between departments, between staff and students—become more permeable. Cross-functional teams, collaborative leadership, and integrated approaches consistently deliver more creative and sustainable outcomes.

### Starting with Real Problems

Rather than implementing technologies, systems or processes for their own sake, successful innovations focus on solving specific, well-defined problems. This problem-centred approach ensures that innovations deliver genuine value.

### Iterative Development

The most effective innovations evolve through cycles of implementation, feedback, and refinement. This iterative approach reduces risk, builds engagement, and ensures that solutions remain relevant as circumstances change.

### Aligning Innovation with Institutional Priorities

Sustainable innovations connect clearly to broader institutional strategies and values. This alignment ensures continued support and resources while preventing the fragmentation that can occur when initiatives are championed in isolation.

### Data-Driven Decision Making

Forward-thinking leaders combine quantitative metrics with qualitative insights to inform both the design and evaluation of new approaches. This balanced use of data informs the business case and helps establish accountability while maintaining focus on real-world impact.

### Collaborative Leadership

Innovation thrives best with leadership that balances clear direction with genuine openness to challenge and adaptation. Leaders who create conditions for others to contribute and experiment benefit from engaged stakeholders and more sustainable outcomes.

### The Power of Lived Experience

Whether in developing family-friendly policies, addressing accessibility challenges, or improving student support, the most effective innovations draw directly on the lived experiences of those they aim to serve. This approach ensures that solutions address real rather than assumed needs.

## 9.1 Key Takeaways

For individuals seeking to foster innovation in their own institutions, we offer these practical recommendations:

1. Create formal mechanisms for cross-functional collaboration, bringing together staff and students from different areas to address shared challenges.
2. Invest in user research capabilities to ensure innovations are grounded in genuine needs rather than assumptions.
3. Develop structured frameworks for piloting and evaluating innovations before wider implementation.
4. Review governance and ethics frameworks to ensure innovation is encouraged whilst responsibly managed to ensure responsible outcomes for those who will be impacted.
5. Build data literacy throughout the organisation, ensuring that both quantitative and qualitative insights inform decision-making.
6. Foster a culture where experimentation is encouraged and learning from failure is valued as highly as success.
7. Look beyond the higher education sector for models and approaches that can be adapted to the university context.
8. Recognise that cultural innovation—changing how people work together and what they value—often underpins and enables more visible operational and technological changes.

The future of UK higher education will undoubtedly bring further challenges and opportunities for innovation. By sharing best practice and taking a pragmatic approach, universities can build the capacity needed to thrive in an increasingly complex and volatile environment. The sector's ability to continue delivering excellent education, research, and societal impact depends not just on preserving what works well, but on continuously reimagining and reinventing how these core purposes are fulfilled.

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## 11. Strive Higher

We are a specialist higher education consultancy united by our shared values of curiosity, courage, and capacity-building; bringing fresh insights to institutions' most complex strategic challenges. Our focus is to help higher education institutions gain insight, drive improvements and deliver greater autonomy and performance. We bring deep, functional expertise and a holistic perspective to every project. We capture value across boundaries and help you create impact today.

At Strive Higher, we support the higher education sector through consultancy, learning and development, and executive coaching services.

If you are interested in discussing how we can support you and your organisation, please get in touch using this email: [info@strivehigher.co.uk](mailto:info@strivehigher.co.uk)