

Engaged Futures

Pathways to an Engaged Future for Higher Education

July 2026

Overview

UK universities are under increasing pressure. They face financial uncertainty, growing expectations to demonstrate public value, and questions about how closely they are connected to the societies they serve. Many people working in and around higher education believe this relationship needs to evolve if the sector is to remain trustworthy, sustainable and relevant.

Engaged Futures is a movement exploring what this evolution could look like. It brings together people from universities, community organisations, policy and other sectors who are already thinking about how higher education might work differently in the decades ahead. Through conversations, workshops and shared research, the project surfaces the challenges facing the sector today, identifies promising ideas and experiments already happening across it, and connects the people behind them.

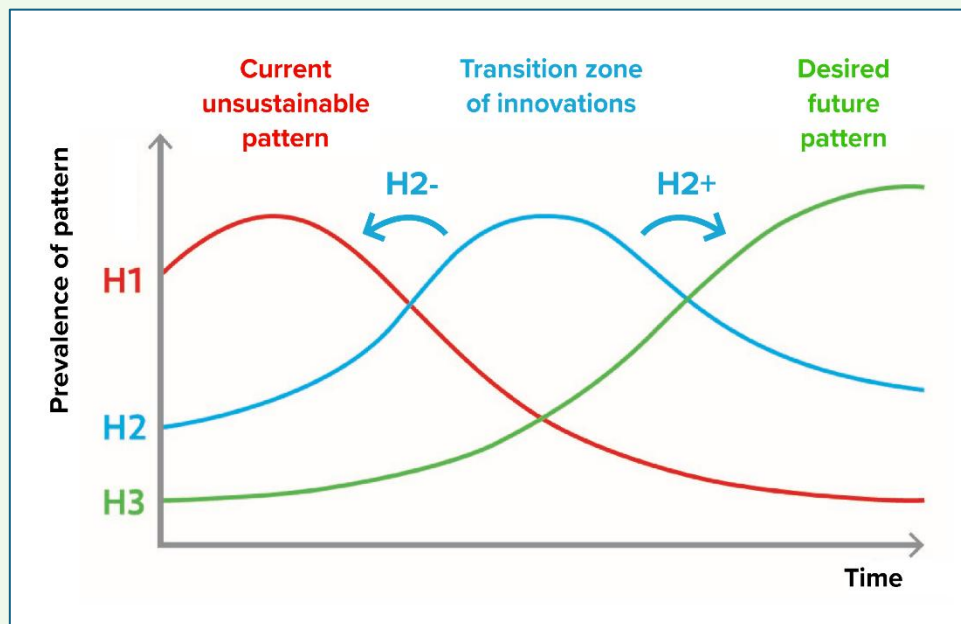
The goal is not to design a single solution or create a new organisation. Engaged Futures aims to align and embolden a network of like-minded people willing to work toward more open, collaborative and publicly engaged universities. In practical terms, we are gathering perspectives, mapping current challenges and emerging innovations, and encouraging participants to develop actions and collaborations that can help shape how universities evolve.

Launched in 2024, the project brings together a wide coalition, referred to as the Catalyst Group, alongside a smaller core Engaged Futures Group of experienced sector thinkers. Convened by the NCCPE, these groups are working to build a shared vision of what an engaged higher education sector looks like in 2045, and to identify actions needed to move toward it. Engaged Futures has involved members of the public, students, and many participants across and alongside the sector who have meaningfully contributed their insights and views.

"The stakes have never been higher for the HE sector. Engagement means being perennially curious about your place in the world, taking responsibility for your actions and never taking for granted the value you are contributing to society. That is the spirit that animates Engaged Futures." — NCCPE, Engaged Futures project page

Key Outputs of the Process

The project has used the three-horizon methodology as a systemic change tool. It provides a useful scaffold for conversations identifying the current system and the indications that it is increasingly unfit for purpose over time, as contexts change (Horizon 1, H1); a desired future in 2045 (Horizon 3, H3), and current innovation and disruption that is taking us towards the desired future (Horizon 2+). It also helps identify innovations that may look good on the surface, but which are propping up the existing system (H2-).



1. The H1/H3 Map

A shared map of where the sector is (H1) and where it needs to get to (H3). This is not a prediction or a plan — it is a shared understanding, developed collectively, of the nature of the transformation required.

In Horizon 1, Engaged Futures participants identified a set of characteristics which are making the current paradigm (H1) increasingly unsustainable. These included:

- commodified, consumerist and transactional relationships with students, communities and knowledge;
- inefficient, bureaucratic and risk-averse processes;
- exclusive assumptions about who produces knowledge and who benefits from it;
- and disconnection — the absence of a shared, emotionally resonant vision of its public purpose.

Crucially, the H1 pattern is not simply a failure of will or imagination on the part of individuals within it. It is actively maintained by incentive structures, funding models, assessment frameworks and institutional habits that reward the very behaviours the sector says it wants to move beyond.

In H3, the group envisioned a sector that is:

- relational, collaborative, and genuinely oriented to public service;
- agile, malleable and responsive to diverse needs and contexts;
- humble in its approach to knowledge — recognising the value of lived experience, practical wisdom and diverse ways of knowing alongside academic expertise.
- genuinely inclusive, creating a sense of belonging for all rather than merely widening access to an unchanged system.

Universities in H3 are porous and place-responsive: not gated communities that invite the public in on occasion, but institutions genuinely embedded in and shaped by the communities around them.

2. The Six Values Contrasts

The six values contrasts distil the H1/H3 shift into its most essential dimensions. Each describes a move from a dominant H1 orientation to an H3 one — and each can be used as a practical lens for asking whether a given initiative, policy or investment is genuinely transformative or is reinforcing H1, the unsustainable patterns of working

"The flotilla is already operating inside the tanker — agile, relational, place-responsive. The question is whether the system will be redesigned around it, or whether financial pressure will pull it back into the tanker's logic." – Engaged Futures Group Member

Value Contrasts

Context	Where we are now: H1	Our vision of the future: H3
Power: Universities traditionally act as gatekeepers	Validator	Connector
Culture: Higher education has often been shaped by systems that exclude or marginalise.	Exclusive	Belonging
Relationships: Treating education as a service or product.	Transactional	Relational
Incentives: Rewarding individual achievement and competition.	Competitive	Collaborative
Purpose: knowledge is narrowly defined and siloed.	Canonical	Interdisciplinary and Integrative
Structure: universities are often slow to change, like large ships with fixed courses.	Tanker (Difficult to Change)	Flotilla (Agile and Flexible)

3. The Five Domains of Action

The five domains of action are the practical core of Engaged Futures' agenda for change. To create these focal points, over 200 H2+ initiatives were identified. Through a process of refinement and reinforcement clustering of the 'domains of action' were identified, aligning where existing momentum for transformation can be identified, connected and amplified. They are not separate silos: they are interdependent, and the connections between them are part of what makes them powerful.

Description of the domains of action:



1. **Transformation Inclusion (who):** Moving beyond surface-level commitments to dismantle the structural barriers that exclude people, with lived experience directly shaping decisions and change.
2. **Places and Spaces Open to All (Where):** Grounding universities in their local communities so that their social, physical and economic footprint actively benefits the people living around them.
3. **Stewarding the System (How):** Building the funding, governance, metrics and incentives that make inclusive and engaged work possible — the enabling infrastructure for systemic change.
4. **Creating Living Knowledge (What):** Challenging who gets to be a researcher, who owns knowledge, and what counts as rigorous — opening up knowledge production to those outside academia.
5. **Building a Movement (Working together):** Creating the collective agency and connective tissue that binds the other domains together and drives coordinated, sector-wide transformation.

4. From Vision to Action: The Domains at Work

The five domains of action represent the areas of the system where aligned effort can create the greatest leverage for change. Working groups have formed around each domain and are moving from broad ambitions to a specific, practical focus. Each group has identified one or two priority action areas — the concrete questions and activities that will drive its work forward.

Where the Project Goes Next

Phase 4: Mobilising change

The Engaged Futures programme is now in its fourth phase: mobilising change. Having developed a shared vision (H3), mapped the current landscape (H1), identified where transformative momentum already exists (H2+ actors and the five domains of action), and begun the work of translating vision into action through the domain working groups, the task now is to build momentum and widen the coalition.

We are working together to prioritise the action areas, test approaches, and build connections between domains. The NCCPE supports this through: facilitating connections between actors across domains; sharing resources, frameworks and evidence; convening events to support collective momentum building; and advocating with funders, policymakers and institutional leaders for the structural changes the work points toward.

An invitation

Engaged Futures is an open project. It is built on the conviction that transformation requires a wide coalition — that the changes needed in higher education cannot be achieved by any single organisation, however well-resourced or well-intentioned, acting alone.

Engaged Futures is an invitation to connect the work you are already doing to a larger movement: to see it not as isolated innovation but as part of an emerging pattern that, with the right support and alignment, can become the new normal.

"Engagement means being perennially curious about your place in the world, taking responsibility for your actions and never taking for granted the value you are contributing to society" – Engaged Futures Group Member.

The Engaged Futures Catalyst Group is open to all who share this spirit. To find out more or to get involved here: [Engaged Futures - Catalyst Group | NCCPE](#)

References

Sharpe, B., Hodgson, A., Leicester, G., Lyon, A. and Fazey, I. (2016) Three horizons: a pathways practice for transformation. *Ecology and Society* 21(2): 47.
<https://doi.org/10.5751/ES-08388-210247>

Further resources from the International Futures Forum: <https://www.iffpraxis.com>