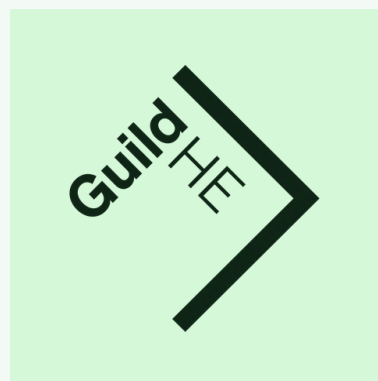
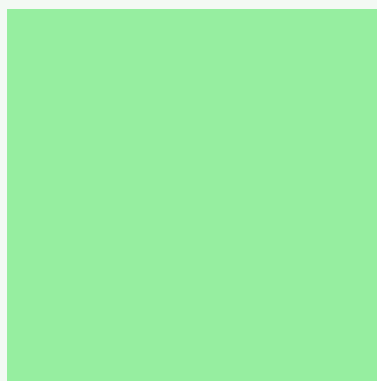
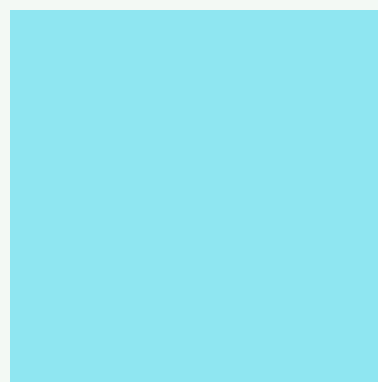


ANNUAL REPORT

2025-26



Contents

Foreword from our Chair	3
A message from our CEO	4
Sector guardianship	6
Priority 1: to grow and support our community to thrive in the 21st century	8
Priority 2: to strengthen GuildHE’s voice and raise the profile of our members	10
Priority 3: to be bold advocates for and champions of distinctive institutions within a diverse sector	12
Priority 4: to enhance an equitable, innovative and purposeful organisation so that we can deliver positive and sustainable change on behalf of our members	16
GuildHE Research	17
Looking ahead with our CEO	20
Public statement	21

Foreword from our Chair

I am delighted to introduce this year's GuildHE Annual Report, which sets out our successes over the past year. GuildHE has gone from strength to strength in advocating for and supporting our members, with meaningful progress being made on reforming the regulatory environment, whilst enjoying significant engagement with Ministers and key officials.

We continue to work on enhancing our member engagement and saw plenty of well attended and impactful events, as well as using the expertise of our members to respond to consultations and influence policy. GuildHE Research also continues to provide high quality insights that are widely used by the sector and policymakers to inform key decisions.

We have remained focused on our objectives to grow and support our community, strengthen our voice and the profile of our members, and champion our diverse sector to enhance our organisation for the benefit of our member institutions.

I would like to thank our members, partners and our expert staff team for all of their valuable support in advancing these objectives and look forward to continuing this work in the coming year.

It has been a delight to welcome four new members into GuildHE over the last year: Laine Theatre Arts, University of Suffolk, London College of Contemporary Arts and MLA College.



The next year will present both challenges and opportunities for GuildHE and the sector. Early engagement with the new Government means that, as it develops its policy agenda for HE, your considerations remain at the forefront. We are committed to ensuring that GuildHE is a strong voice, a powerful champion and a support system for its members.

I realise that all institutions will be facing challenges at this time. GuildHE as an organisation will continue to support us in navigating them. Most importantly, it is our collective strength that will turn many of these into opportunities. I encourage you to stay connected with other members, so that we will emerge stronger, individually and collectively.

Professor Ken Sloan
GuildHE Chair and Vice Chancellor,
Harper Adams University

A message from our CEO

It has been a really productive year for GuildHE, during which we have deepened our public profile and honed a sharper set of messages on behalf of the distinctive institutions we represent. I remain clear-eyed and committed to making GuildHE the UK's most influential voice for distinctive institutions and a leader of conversations about how we shape a better tomorrow.

At the core of GuildHE's identity is an unwavering commitment to advocate for and champion institutional diversity. Our membership spans a wide spectrum, including small and large, rural and urban, practice-based and online, as well as publicly and privately-funded institutions. Renowned for their practical, industry-focused education, research, and innovation, our member institutions address critical 21st century skills needs while driving regional growth and enhancing our social and cultural environment.

The diversity within our membership provides GuildHE with an invaluable perspective on the unique challenges and opportunities within the higher education sector, which we leverage in our discussions with policymakers. Over the past year, we have consistently championed this value in public forums, highlighting the importance of maintaining a range of institutional types to widen access and secure opportunities for all; something that will be all the more important to drive prosperity in every postcode, as is the new Prime Minister's ambition.

Over the past year, we have continued our journey to refresh and add even greater impact to our messaging. Our repositioning has



attracted increased website and social media traffic, greater prospective member enquiries, more invitations to develop policy with sector and government bodies, and a growing recognition from across the sector of who we are and what we stand for.

We have had some significant policy and regulatory successes over the past year. We have driven changes to the AHRC's follow-on funding rules and spearheaded efforts to establish TEF as the definitive assessment mechanism for quality. More significantly, we were able to work closely with senior civil servants and policymakers to influence the content of the DfE's White Paper, published in the autumn of 2025, which drew heavily from our core principles and the submission we made to the department. It noted that higher education should not be treated as 'one size fits all', recognising that distinctive, non-traditional, and smaller-scale institutions are an essential component to our healthy sector and key to widening access. Similarly, the paper recognised that specialisms are of unique value to our sector and our collective national strength.

None of our public-facing work, though, matters more than our members. When

considering what work to undertake, we ask ourselves one core question: does it benefit our members? If it doesn't, we won't do it. If it does, or it could, then we embrace the challenge, even if it may not always be straightforward.

The work we've done over the past year to build a new development programme for members embodies that philosophy. This new suite of workshops and webinars has enabled our members to take control, within an often chaotic environment, to ensure their staff are equipped with the tools needed to steer themselves through our 21st century landscape. The way we have evolved our membership offer in light of feedback and these environmental pressures is key to our future identity and the value we offer. We won't shy away from reviewing our activities, our resources, or our focus, to ensure we are always operating in line with our members' interests and delivering the strongest value we can. We are, as ever, by our members' sides as partners, representatives and supporters.

“ An outstanding member organisation with a very high quality team. Thank you!

While our members are at the heart of everything we do, our GuildHE team is a small, but mighty, engine of 14 staff (including me), without which nothing in these pages would be possible. I am enormously honoured and grateful to lead such an enthusiastic team of capable, warm, and intelligent individuals who work hard everyday so that GuildHE can punch above its weight. I want to thank my team here in these pages, which hold just some of the evidence of their efforts.

The report that follows provides summaries of what we've delivered over this past year. It starts by talking through our formal role as a sector guardian, which includes our involvement in key coordinating bodies and

work alongside others like UUK, Jisc, and Advance HE, to ensure the sector's infrastructure and systems are functioning well and improving where possible. The report then captures what we've delivered against our four main strategic priorities, before outlining specific work delivered under the banner of GuildHE Research. It next outlines some of our ambitions for the upcoming operational year (2026-27), which we've already begun. As ever, we cannot list everything we've done in one comprehensive report, as it would make for an unruly and overly long document, but we hope to have captured the main and most important headlines of our achievements. Some of those most important headlines concern what our members think about the service we provide, so throughout the report, we have captured our members' own words about the value they find in GuildHE; these are highlighted in blue boxes.

A final reflection: I am forever an optimist and so, while I commit myself to recognising the genuine challenges facing us as we navigate this increasingly fraught and uncertain time, I strive to do so in a way that feels measured, balanced and positive. How we approach these challenges will determine our ability to overcome them; when so much is beyond our control, we focus on what we can do today to influence things positively. Investing in you, our members, as you invest in your staff and students – these are all acts of faith in the universal value of education and our ability to improve our lives by helping others improve theirs. Kindness, curiosity and an unwavering belief in the power of positivity to unlock opportunities we cannot yet see, will be the defining features of our GuildHE approach to our members and those in our wider community.

Thank you for continuing to work with and support us, whether you are a member, a colleague, or a sector friend. We are honoured to participate in this sector and look forward to another year by your side.

Dr Brooke Storer-Church
Chief Executive Officer,
GuildHE

Sector guardianship

As a formal representative body for the UK HE sector, GuildHE holds a number of responsibilities, including organising activities that strengthen collaboration and collective policy insight.

As a Company Member of organisations including Advance HE, QAA, HESA, UCEA and Jisc, we appoint nominees and observers to the Boards of these organisations, enabling us to nominate GuildHE heads of institutions to ensure a range of perspectives is represented across key bodies. Our CEO also attends their Board meetings and regularly meets with their leaders. We work closely with them to better understand the needs of the higher education sector and to undertake collaborative work.

In service to this role over the past year, we have:

- Co-chaired the DfE LLE Provider Working Group and co-convened the UK Quality Council with UUK, while agreeing plans to shift the Quality Council secretariat to QAA from next year.
- Joined the steering and working groups leading the review of the CUC Code of Governance, amid heightened scrutiny of sector governance standards by the Government, regulators, and media. Through this work, we shone light on the specific challenges faced by distinctive institutions to ensure the refreshed code would be applicable to the widest range of institutional types.
- Participated in the newly formed DfE Community Cohesion Framework Committee, offering critical institutional perspectives on the methodology and final research outputs intended to establish a comprehensive cohesion framework across education.

“ Professional, inspirational staff, expert analysis and political influence and insight, and a positive, energetic approach to advocacy.

- Refreshed the joint GuildHE/UUK Admissions Code of Practice to take account of emerging concerns around institutional behaviours and the use of agents in recruitment practices.



- Served on the signatories group for the Concordat to Support Research Integrity, contributing to discussions on the operating model and convening members to participate in a review of the annual statement template.
- Contributed thought leadership to the DSIT Horizon Europe Systems Group, providing insights into members' uptake of HEU and opportunities for the future.
- Informed significant strategic developments at UKRI by sharing members' experiences and ambitions directly with UKRI's new CEO, Ian Chapman, who, along with British Academy colleagues, noted our contributions as valuable and constructive.
- Instituted a series of regular meetings with senior leaders at Research England to shape key policy developments, including the strategic institutional research funding review, the transparency review and research assessment.

“ Active body, excellent networks and opportunities for engagement.

- Developed a new resource, in partnership with AdvanceHE, to support leaders navigating merger and strategic transformation. Equally, we worked closely with Universities UK on its Transformation and Efficiency Taskforce to inform the evolution of our Development programme offer.
- Carved new leadership space for GuildHE as a technician supporter by finalising our Technician Commitment Action Plan, which then received an award in recognition of our impact and ambition.



- Proactively authored and delivered a Clinical Health Delivery briefing to DHSC and DfE ministers, which led to a combined DHSC/DfE CEO roundtable with GuildHE, UUKi and mission groups.
- Strengthened our advocacy for teacher education by drafting and delivering a Ministerial letter regarding teacher education placements and mentorship, which led to more active DfE engagement within the Teacher Education Advisory Group (TEAG), the termly meeting convened by GuildHE on behalf of UUK and the whole sector.
- Judged or supported a number of key sector awards ceremonies, including the new Times Higher Education award for Specialist Institution of the Year, which was subsequently won by a GuildHE member institution; the Employer and Community Partnerships award as part of the Graduate Futures Institute's Academic Employability Awards 2026; UKCISA's WeAreInternational Awards; the EAUC Green Gowns; and the University Alliance Doctoral Training Alliance alumni award.

Priority 1:

To grow and support our community to thrive in the 21st century

At the heart of our mission lies a commitment to building a vibrant, interconnected, resilient and supportive community, that serves as an enduring resource for collective wisdom and insight. This year, we have strengthened this foundation by broadening and deepening our cross-sector partnerships, expanding our networking offer, and working alongside our members to design supports that meet them where they are. By facilitating direct access to policymakers, sector leaders and each other through roundtables, dinners and other meetings, we have successfully connected our members to the voices and tools necessary to maintain agility, foster innovation, and thrive as we tackle the emergent challenges of the 21st century.

This year, we have:

- Significantly enhanced our member engagement as measured by increased member visits and meetings, including 12 in-person campus visits by our CEO and 97 events delivered, both online and in-person, for our members.
- Grown our community by four new member institutions.
- Revamped our approach to our annual conference by condensing the main proceedings into one day to add optional networking and entertainment opportunities over two evenings.
- Hosted 98 delegates at our successful and entertaining annual conference at Rose Bruford College, where we offered a content-rich agenda, alongside world-

class West End entertainment. We were joined by a range of excellent speakers, including the Minister for Skills, Rt Hon Baroness Smith of Malvern, who gave the in-person keynote to kick off the event.

- Refreshed our internal processes so that we could offer an enhanced policy analysis service, which now includes up to 40 rapid, high-quality policy briefs a year, alongside the six Policy Update papers we already offered.

“ The event was a high-quality, well-organised experience with brilliant content, sharing that they gained a clearer sense of future actions and felt less isolated thanks to the connections made.

- Redesigned our network format to incorporate member feedback and increase engagement, hosting 42 in-person and online network events.
- Launched a new, bespoke internal group mailing platform to provide members with professional, standardised email addresses and establish a dedicated space for peer-to-peer engagement and the distribution of curated policy intelligence outside of formal meetings.

- Led 10 policy roundtables and workshops on key consultations and policy challenges. These included a members' event with the new Chair of the OfS, Edward Peck, an Institutional Neutrality webinar with Shakespeare Martineau, and REF workshops to inform the development of the assessment criteria.
- Managed further improvements to the bespoke member area of our website. Access to the members-only site has now been expanded to all members of our networks.

“ The workshop days were very relevant and productive.

- Developed a diverse and credible portfolio of development programmes focused on AI, governance, and leadership, based on members' feedback and current strategic challenges in the sector. This growth has been bolstered by a wide range of new external partnerships, enhancing our ability to respond to emerging issues with specialist expertise. Approximately 230 colleagues participated in our development programme work this year, with over 12 workshops and sessions.



- Restated our commitment to inclusivity via ongoing programming, including lunchtime learning workshops for all GuildHE members, a quarterly newsletter and a dedicated EDI network.

Our development programme for members included:

- A Gatenby Sanderson Leadership Programme
- An AHEP Governance Programme
- Leadership workshops with Caroline Dunne
- A KPMG & Mills and Reeves Radical Transformation Workshop
- The Organisational Efficiency Maturity Assessment with AHUA and SUMS
- An AI in Higher Education workshop with Jisc
- The Digital Resistance AI workshop
- A responsible AI in Higher Education workshop from the AiEd Certified Framework
- Governance workshops for professional development
- The Advance HE training programme for the members of our institutions' governing bodies

Priority 2:

To strengthen GuildHE's voice and raise the profile of our members

In a period of profound sector-wide transformation, ensuring that the unique perspectives and achievements of our members are championed at the highest levels is paramount. Our communications work centres on amplifying the voice of GuildHE and elevating the profile of our members as essential pillars of the UK's economic and social landscape. Building on this progress, we have listened to member feedback and are now evolving our public affairs approach to be even more impactful.

This year, we have:

- Developed a national campaign strategy focused on the value of higher education as an essential pillar to the UK, which will steer our communications over the next 12-24 months and anchor our new public affairs and communications approach.
- Finalised and published a comprehensive GuildHE stakeholder mapping tool designed to track key parliamentary and sector figures, including MPs, peers, and All Party Parliamentary Groups (APPGs), to enhance our members' strategic political intelligence.
- Deepened our political engagement by hosting dinners with the Minister of Skills, a roundtable with Liberal Democrat MPs, and attending the Labour and Reform UK Party Conferences, as we work to build relationships and influence the policy formulations of existing and emerging policy makers.
- Hosted a strategic policy dinner between GuildHE, DfE and Landex members, providing a high-level forum to examine how land-based education can better align with national priorities regarding food security, environmental sustainability and the broader skills reform agenda.
- Presented keynote addresses at 19 sector-wide conferences and events including: Times Higher Education's Student Success and Hashtag Higher Education conferences; QAA conferences; Advance HE's governance conference; the ARMA Conference 2026; Graduate Futures Institute Academic Employability Awards; and Westminster Higher Education Forums on Financial Sustainability and the TEF.
- Attracted new users to GuildHE's website through its refreshed site and enhanced public offerings. In 2025-26, our website reached 88,700 users and 118,665 webpage views. We launched our new website in February 2025 and are now collating consistent data in order to report our progress going forward.

“ We feel very much listened to, consulted, and part of GuildHE as an organisation.

- Published 81 blogs, thought leadership pieces and news articles. As part of this, we published 10 Member Spotlights that garnered over 1,000 readers, which showcased a range of our members' unique strengths, from the National Institute of Teaching's dynamic professional development model, to Central School of Ballet's work to secure its talent pipeline.

Our social media activity achieved a 42% increase in our professional network and our followers grew by over 1,300 to reach 4,655, reflecting our growing influence and communications impact.

- Amplified our public messaging through increased social media messaging. In 2025-26, our content delivered 139,795 impressions and 3,858 engagements. Near-daily updates drove a 42% increase in our professional network over 12 months, and our followers grew by over 1,300 to reach 4,655, reflecting our growing influence and communications impact.
- Contributed to or authored more than 30 articles in external publications including Times Higher Education, Wonkhe, HEPI, University World News, Research Professional and Arts Professional. Topics varied from the SPG funding cuts and weekend students loans, to minimum entry standards and GuildHE's Creative HE Strategy Project.
- Developed new relationships with press contacts, including with Arts Professional, where we have been showcased three times this year, on the cost of cutting creative education, the Strategic Priorities Grant cuts and our Creative HE Strategy Project.



Priority 3:

To be bold advocates for and champions of distinctive institutions within a diverse sector

At the core of GuildHE's identity is an unwavering commitment to advocate for and champion institutional diversity. Our membership spans a wide spectrum, including small and large, rural and urban, practice-based and online, as well as publicly and privately funded institutions. Renowned for their practical, industry-focused education, research, and innovation, our institutions address critical 21st century skills needs, while driving regional growth and enhancing our social and cultural environment.

The diversity within our membership provides GuildHE with an invaluable perspective on the unique challenges and opportunities within the higher education sector, which we leverage in our discussions with policymakers. Over the past year, we have consistently championed this value in public forums, highlighting the importance of maintaining a range of institutional types to widen access and secure opportunities for all, something that will be all the more important to drive prosperity in every postcode as is the new Prime Minister's ambition.

To that end, this year we have:

- Regularly participated on blogs and panels, contributing to think pieces and articles for sector partners, such as HE Professional, HEPI, Wonkhe, Westminster Higher Education Forum and Research Professional News.
- Produced 22 consultation and inquiry responses for Parliamentary Select Committees, Government, regulators and other national agencies.
- Led discussions with DfE's Regulation and Quality team to ensure policy thinking stemming from the Post-16 White Paper recognises the unique characteristics of distinctive institutions and delivers systems-thinking that does not assume 'one size fits all'.
- Collaborated with the DfE Skills Group to deepen its shared understanding of how GuildHE institutions champion student enterprise and innovation, alongside offering diverse pathways into the professions. This engagement focused on fostering freelance careers and preparing students for the evolving world of work. Furthermore, we highlighted critical concerns regarding Graduate Outcomes data in relation to NEET statuses – an issue previously overlooked and established a line of communication for future evidence-based advocacy.
- Gained traction in arguing that OfS registration fee calculations need a rethink, leading to a new DfE consultation model designed to rebalance sector costs and ease disproportionate financial pressure on the smallest higher education providers.

“ GuildHE gives smaller and specialist institutions a stronger, more tailored advocacy voice with government and regulators.

- Expanded GuildHE Creative's collective to include more than 30 institutions, working together to shape and future-proof the creative higher education ecosystem, through policy discussions and advocacy projects. This included agreeing a plan with the group to develop and deliver a national creative higher education strategic plan for institutions, industry, government and other stakeholders to secure the talent pipeline into the future.
- Established direct links with, and representation, from DCMS, Graduate Futures Institute and the Creative Industries Policy and Evidence Centre, to discuss creative-specific policies and practices to enhance our members' profiles, collaborate on problem-solving and advocate for policy reform. These colleagues have attended regular GHE Creative meetings and joined the taskforce that is helping to deliver the Creative HE Strategy project.

GuildHE launched the Creative HE Strategy Project at the Labour Party Conference 2025. The inaugural workshop engaged over 35 representatives from across the education, cultural and arts sectors.

- Commissioned and launched the Creative HE Strategy Project at the Labour Party Conference 2025. This inaugural workshop engaged over 35 representatives from across further and higher education, alongside various cultural and arts organisations, to underline how creative higher education supports a thriving ecosystem of knowledge, skills, research, innovation and civic benefits for the creative industry and wider society.
- Brokered new relationships with DSIT colleagues to secure their attendance at GuildHE's inaugural Research and Knowledge Exchange Symposium in March 2026 and membership of the Creative Higher Education Strategy taskforce, aimed at delivering a national strategy in early 2027.
- Engaged proactively and directly with senior BIST colleagues on the value of vocational higher education to Jobs Plans development and policy enactment, and policymaking for entrepreneurialism in the UK.
- Submitted a representation to HM Treasury ahead of the Autumn Budget, making the case for targeted investment to stabilise higher education, protect institutional diversity, and support regional growth. This highlighted the disproportionate financial pressures facing smaller-scale and specialist providers, while demonstrating their significant contribution to skills, innovation, local



economies, and widening participation. It called for measures including inflation-linked tuition fees, increased investment in teaching and infrastructure, a new High-Impact Grant for nationally and regionally significant specialist institutions, greater pension flexibility, and the reintroduction of maintenance grants.

- Secured regular policy catch-ups with the DCMS skills teams on the future of Creative HE and how we best support the creative industry's ambitions within the industrial strategy.
- Offered evidence to the House of Commons Select Committee inquiry into student loans, highlighting how the current system can disproportionately affect graduates with lower, volatile or non-linear earnings, particularly those entering creative, freelance, portfolio and public-service careers. We advocated for a fairer and more transparent approach to interest, repayments and consumer protections, recognising the wider social and economic value of higher education beyond graduate salaries. Our evidence further raised concerns about retrospective changes to loan terms, the impact on trust and widening participation, and called for a greater balance between individual contributions and public investment in higher education.
- Responded swiftly and decisively to the sudden announcement withdrawing funding for nursing, computing, and creative courses in the Strategic Priorities Grant 2026-27 by securing press coverage, delivering briefings to the GuildHE Board and members (including a model letter to write to local MPs) and sending a tailored letter and briefing to DfE and DCMS, detailing the impact of these cuts on the future of creative higher education.
- Influenced the formation of the OfS provider panel through our persistent call for structural regulatory reforms, which also resulted in three specialist institutions joining as panel members. Beyond hosting the new OfS Chair for a member



roundtable, our dialogue with OfS's executive leadership has already delivered several key institutional enhancements, such as increased communication with the sector and a commitment to publish more detailed information about internal regulatory processes and investigations.

GuildHE's constructive dialogue with OfS's new executive leadership has already delivered several key institutional enhancements to the sector.

- Proactively shaped TEF methodology through formal and informal engagement. We influenced the framework through robust responses on capital investment, FE regulation, and franchise models. Throughout, we consistently advocated for a level playing field, ensuring diverse institutions can compete and comply with regulatory activity regardless of size or scale. Regarding consumer protection, we have urged the regulator to champion the sector's exceptional student partnership work, ensuring narrow consumerist models do not undermine the active student engagement that defines our community.

“ The level of accessible, personal engagement — rather than a purely transactional membership — is a strong indicator of the collaborative relationship GuildHE offers, and reinforces the case that this is a body genuinely invested in supporting institutions.

- Engaged consistently with the OfS on the free speech conditions of registration and complaints scheme, building a strong relationship to advocate for members and facilitate direct engagement through webinars and roundtables. We successfully pushed for greater investigation transparency and clarity on legal duties, resulting in Regulatory Advice 24, including guidance on human rights law intersections. Additionally, the new complaints scheme's rules reflect GuildHE's core recommendations on internal process time allowances and institutional information sharing, ensuring a more workable, transparent system for members.
- Drove meaningful change via our response to the International Levy consultation by securing a waiver for institutions with the smallest international student cohorts. Furthermore, we sustained our active engagement with international sector representatives through our ongoing membership in the UKCISA Strategic Advisory Committee and the UUKi Funders and Managers Group.
- Carved out greater GuildHE leadership on issues related to student experience, by engaging consistently on behalf of members on DfE's HE Access & Participation Taskforce, the DfE Mental Health taskforce, and the Disabled Student Commitment advisory group, ensuring policy interventions support engagement by a wide variety of institutional types.
- Successfully lobbied DfE and HMT to protect students from loan eligibility miscalculation penalties, ensuring repayments follow standard procedures instead of early recovery.
- Secured member case studies for the UCAS/Sutton Trust Contextual Admissions work and the expansion of future National Student Survey data collection to include care leavers, estrangement, and service child status.
- Pushed the interests of smaller-scale, specialist and distinctive providers to the fore in our response to the OIA consultation on harassment and sexual misconduct, advocating for guidance aligned with Condition E6, that reflects the unique challenges of those providers. We engaged with OfS in multiple forums on the disability statement of expectations, securing a collaborative workshop with members to inform its content.
- Contributed to the removal of the EBacc, alongside the implementation of new qualifications designed to bolster English and mathematics provision for learners without a GCSE, alongside securing a renewed commitment to embedding creative education as a core component of the curriculum, as a result of our closer relationships with DfE. We have maintained an active dialogue regarding the future of T-Levels and V-Levels, ensuring that the needs of students with SEND remain a central consideration in these developments.

Priority 4:

To enhance an equitable, innovative and purposeful organisation so that we can deliver positive and sustainable change on behalf of our members

GuildHE remains steadfast in our commitment to building a purposeful, sustainable, and high-performing organisation to best serve our members. Building upon the structural and cultural foundations established in previous years, this year has focused on embedding our refreshed ways of working. We have continued to prioritise accountability, cross-team collaboration, and leadership development. GuildHE is committed to investing in its team to ensure we have the skills needed to continue to deliver our objectives and support growth and development within the organisation.

This year, we have:

- Expanded our capacity by appointing three new team members, including GuildHE's first ever Head of Public Affairs to elevate our public advocacy; and our first dedicated Research Policy Officer to support our expanding research policy work.
- Streamlined our appraisal system, staff objectives, and project management tools to improve operational efficiency. We maintain an inclusive, hybrid work environment, focused on wellbeing, equality, and allyship.
- Conducted a comprehensive review of staff benefits, development pathways and our staff handbook, to ensure GuildHE remains a competitive employer compliant with legislative updates.
- Undertook a forensic review of GuildHE's operational budget to identify areas for cost savings, leading to work to explore office space alternatives to our historic

Woburn House base and confirming a new collaborative co-location arrangement with Jisc.

- Refined the way we embed inclusivity into our team culture, including working with facilitators for team-focused activities and Board diversity.
- Updated our governance documents to make clear the expectations of members and our Board of Trustees in securing the organisation's reputation and accountability.

We appointed GuildHE's first ever Head of Public Affairs to elevate our public advocacy.

- Built in regular reviews of member feedback, to ensure we are working in agile and flexible ways, that are responsive and ensure GuildHE members stay at the heart of everything we do.
- Prioritised discussions with staff about the importance of taking annual leave and balancing their energies, to ensure sustainability for the organisation and positive role-modelling for our colleagues.

GuildHE Research

GuildHE Research (GHER) is an additional subscription to our main GuildHE membership offer for those institutions wishing to engage specifically on research. It provides members with a network of peers and activities to support work across their emergent and consolidating research environments. Comprising 30 institutions from across the UK and led by GuildHE's research policy team, it offers regular network meetings, shared services at discounted rates, development programmes focused on research areas, and a dedicated postgraduate researcher community. Demand for our services in this space is growing and we hope to work closely with members over the next year to identify how and where we can offer further support.

Over the past year, we have:

- Secured for our members a combined £450,000 in annual savings by offering them shared services at discounted rates we negotiate on their behalf.
- Hosted three consortium meetings featuring speakers from UKRI and Research England on REF, research integrity and open research, and sector-led projects including Equity in Demand Management and the Concordat for the Environmental Sustainability of Research.
- Carved out space for GHER members to engage in deep dives into crosscutting policy areas, such as Freedom of Speech, parliamentary engagement and the Creative Higher Education Strategy project. Collectively, these have provided members with insights into current trends on research and tangible opportunities to feed into policies as they are being designed.

- Deepened connections between our research and knowledge exchange communities, typified by the introduction of a new joint Research and Knowledge Exchange Symposium in March 2026. Speakers from NCACE at the University of Cambridge examined knowledge exchange metrics. POST and UPEN colleagues shared their approaches to engaging with policy and the NTDC joined technicians to outline developments in recognition and training for technical staff.

“ Since I became part of this community, my PhD journey has improved so much, thanks to you and the whole GuildHE team.

- Designed and delivered a Research England Study Day, facilitated by Research England's engagement team. The content was specifically built for GuildHE institutions and included presentations from the REF Director, Directors of Research Funding, and Director of Knowledge Exchange. The day demonstrated our commitment to providing members with access to key contacts, and our convening power, to policy and funding colleagues.



- Enhanced our Doctoral Support programme to ensure it continues to deliver tangible opportunities for PGRs to expand their networks and broaden their horizons. Activities have included hosting Global Majority PGR network meetings, offering sessions during Academic Writing Month and designing workshops on teaching and academic writing. We run a peer support community which meets monthly, hosts a successful three minute thesis competition, and is a valuable conduit to identifying student volunteers to support the PGR network meetings and support activities. The seven sessions run so far in 2026 included four talks across a wide range of topics such as embodied research, community building, publishing and research dissemination that 129 people registered to attend.
- Convened our annual Doctoral Festival at Northeastern University London in May 2026. The sold out event offered more student places than ever before and featured 14 speakers from universities, charities, funding bodies and sector organisations. The festival received excellent feedback for its high quality sessions and workshops, supportive and collegiate atmosphere, and the connections students built.
- Supported members in their preparations for research degree awarding powers, bringing our provision into better alignment with the OfS processes by working across all DAPs in our development programme model.



- Expanded our REF 2029 support for members by adding three new peer support sessions for first and second-time submitting institutions. These have been vital in highlighting where the guidance is unclear, or where processes are problematic for very small submissions. The forum provides a safe and constructive space to be candid about challenges, while informing advice the GuildHE team returns to Research England about REF.

“ GuildHE Research supports members developing their research base, doctoral provision and REF participation relevant to ... our current growth trajectory rather than assuming an already-mature research infrastructure. GuildHE's membership includes similarly-sized, specialist and post-92-type institutions, offering more relevant peer comparators and shared-service opportunities than a mixed group dominated by large research-intensives.

- Increased GuildHE representation in REF 2029 substantially, growing to 11 appointments across three panels from just four members on a single panel in REF 2021.
- Successfully argued against the introduction of a two-tier REF, working constructively with sector bodies including UUK, University Alliance, Russell Group and Conservatoires UK, to align our responses and demonstrate the key value of REF as an inclusive assessment in which excellence can be identified and rewarded, wherever it is found.
- Positively influenced the AHRC's follow-on funding rules as a result of our advocacy. We provided feedback on the limitations of the existing scheme, particularly for creative arts, which have not traditionally been as well supported by AHRC funding. The Council has moved toward expanding eligibility beyond prior award holders. While the initial recommendation was modified, we have successfully secured a commitment that, from next year, the scheme will be accessible to projects supported via Impact Accelerator Accounts. This represents a significant policy success for our research community.
- Received acknowledgement from UKRI that our voice has genuine and real value in providing a more rounded view of the sector, reporting back that the way we are able to be constructive and speak in alignment, with nuance where needed, is valuable. We can see UKRI heeding our advice in its announcements regarding the strengthening of green open access and repository infrastructure and its intention to work with specialist and low-volume research organisations as key priorities in its next phase of open access policy implementation.



Looking ahead with our CEO

When I joined midway through 2024, and I reviewed with our team and Board our strategic direction, it was clear that we should organise and focus our energies on building and supporting our membership community. Alongside that, I wanted to make visible the policy work we often do behind the scenes. The strategic objectives within this report reflect that intention. They continue to shape our efforts.

Our focus remains strongly on raising our members' profiles, increasing GuildHE's influence within the sector and beyond, and deepening our capacity for thought leadership as we seek to build a better tomorrow together. This approach will not only guarantee continuity of service, but also allow us to build upon the achievements of the past two years. This is particularly important at a time when our sector must overcome significant challenges and forge these into new opportunities.

In this spirit, we've got some ambitious plans for this next year (2026-27), to include:

- Hosting our best annual conference yet and the first one at one of our land-based specialist institutions.
 - Launching the nation's first Creative Higher Education Strategy, which aims to define a roadmap for securing a collaborative future for creative education by uniting providers, policy makers and industry leaders under a shared strategic vision.
 - Delivering an enhanced public advocacy campaign, targeting key policymakers and a wider range of political parties to underline the value of GuildHE institutions
- to the country's future social, political and economic success.
- Shaping conversations about how we might better measure the value of higher education, arguing for measures that acknowledge higher education's social, cultural, and political value, none of which is captured by the current graduate salary or economic measures. This work will be done in partnership with Universities UK.
 - Adding new events to our calendar, including a new all-members spring Policy Summit conference and hosting a parliamentary event to further amplify our voice and presence amongst parliamentarians and key decision-makers.

“ GuildHE is proactive for its members, dynamic and authentic.”

- Contributing to regulation and funding reviews across the sector, including the Strategic Priorities Grant, the Teaching Excellence Framework, and UKRI's preparations for the knowledge exchange funding review. Our policy team will also be proactively supporting members to engage in priority government policies such as devolution, skills and NEETs.
- Increasing our public engagement via social media and mainstream media, using the expertise and insight of our members to tell the success story of GuildHE and its institutions.
- Enhancing communication with our members through our revamped Debriefs, improved newsletters and other channels we will explore.
- Settling into our new Fetter Lane office space and continuing to review our finances to ensure we're operating in the most economical fashion possible, while delivering maximum value to our members.

Public benefit statement

The Trustees have reviewed the activities of the Charity in the light of the guidance published by the Charity Commission on public benefit. The Trustees are satisfied that GuildHE's activities are for the public benefit. GuildHE provides public benefit to those planning to undertake, those undertaking and those with an interest in the outcomes of UK higher education as a consequence of the assistance it gives its member institutions. Through the direct advice, information and comment it provides into the public domain and into policy frameworks, it informs the public debate and raises public awareness of a range of educational and other professionally-based issues at the subject level. Supporting the heads of institutions and their staff, it enables them to lead their charitable and educational organisations more effectively. As a consequence, GuildHE has an impact on the delivery of higher education through good practice exchange and advice on policy. The organisations that GuildHE members lead provide a range of higher education opportunities to students from the UK and abroad, and they have public benefit impacts on the cultural, social and intellectual development of their communities.

© GuildHE (This information may be freely used and copied for non-commercial purposes, provided that the source is acknowledged).

GuildHE, 15 Fetter Lane, London, EC4A 1BW
020 3393 6134 | info@guildhe.ac.uk | www.guildhe.ac.uk

Charity Number: 1012218



GuildHE
15 Fetter Lane
London
EC4A 1BW

020 3393 6134
info@guildhe.ac.uk
@guildhe

Charity No. 1012218

www.guildhe.ac.uk