ncee

Entrepreneurship in Education

THE 2022 NCEE
LEADERSHIP
SURVEY

How the pandemic will shape university leaders and their institutions

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Foreword

From all that has happened to us over the last two years, there is a recurring question about whether there will be permanent change in higher education. There will undoubtedly be change in the way higher education delivers learning and teaching, and changes in the way staff do their jobs and where they do them. But a further question is will leadership have to change?

Our research has shown the challenges leaders are facing. As expected, dealing with uncertainty has intensified along with the need to respond quickly and rapidly to change. Leaders report the opportunity the pandemic gave to accelerate changes that were already in the pipeline. They are more confident in the ability of their teams to manage change. However, for the first time we have seen staff wellbeing top the list of priority activities for the future.

Effective leadership over the last two years has meant recognising our community, the teams within them and the individuals who make up those teams more than ever. Going forwards, there will be more online working, and a greater recognition of home life. However, we will also see a reaffirmation of the value of working face to face.

Leading teams online has its challenges. Conversations can be more forced and formal. You cannot see the subtleties of facial expressions and inevitably engagement can become transactional. However, there have also been a great deal of opportunities. It is easier to work with partners in different parts of the world, to get in touch with people, and to progress initiatives and partnerships.

Whether online or face to face, leadership means providing an environment in which people can flourish so they can deliver for the organisation. Leadership is about setting the direction. Good leadership, however, requires:

- Decisiveness
- Thoughtfulness
- Kindness
- Authenticity
- Consistency and fairness.

We would characterise leadership as being kind and thoughtful as well as being decisive and considered. As we have learned good leaders need good decision-making skills and to make those decisions in a consistent and fair manner.

The core qualities of leadership remain consistent over time, but the pressure under which leaders operate and the way in which they express their leadership changes. Being authentic and values-led should be the mantra for today's leaders.

We continue to support leadership development in higher education and beyond. Our development programmes create real impact, and see participants move to senior positions in higher education leading creative, innovative, successful entrepreneurial universities. Whilst our article series provokes new thinking of leadership in today's higher education. Join us in developing your leadership **www.ncee.org.uk**.

Ian Dunn
Chair, NCEE Board

Professor Mary Stuart
Director, NCEE Board

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"I sense there are more opportunities than people realise to seek advantage as a university in a very competitive environment"

Survey respondent

Findings at a glance

During summer 2021, we surveyed 41 senior leaders from 25 universities (a breakdown is provided at the end of the report). Respondents report that the management of change and complexity is key for higher education leadership – but also that their focus on responding to uncertainty and policy flux pre-dates COVID-19. Leaders recognise the vital role of their staff in doing things differently over the past 18 months, and staff wellbeing tops the list of priority activities for higher education leaders over the next couple of years. Although all leaders acknowledge that their institutions need significant change, they are more confident in the ability of their institution to adapt to change and competition than before the pandemic.

- **The complexity of issues facing universities is the top challenge for higher education leaders (50%).** Leaders also face too many demands on their time (37%), and dealing with continual change and uncertainty (34%). These were also the top three concerns from our previous pre-pandemic survey, meaning **continual change and complex challenges have dominated the agenda of higher education leaders for at least the past five years.**

- Managing the implications of external changes is the top university priority (46%), followed by ensuring financial stability (32%), with managing internal changes a distant third (10%). **Universities are now more focused on dealing with broader circumstances rather than driving their own strategy.** Although leaders report that staff have adapted well to the disruption of COVID-19, a period of policy stability is needed for universities to look inwards, and to understand and address not only the changes that have been wrought by the pandemic, but also what the continual policy change in the higher education and broader political landscapes has meant for their institutions.

- All respondents felt that the nature of leadership has changed since the start of the pandemic. **Dealing with uncertainty has intensified for 85% of leaders, and 83% report a greater need to respond quickly to rapid change.** Leaders are focused on navigating their institutions through the turbulence, and less preoccupied with the 'traditional' challenges of managing a higher education institution – such as recruiting students and competition with other universities. A fifth of leaders reported that bureaucracy is less of a concern than before the pandemic.

- **Accelerating changes already in the pipeline was the biggest opportunity emerging from the pandemic for leaders.** New ways of working and the role of digital technologies have been widely recognised, but leaders also identified entrepreneurial opportunities with new and existing partners.

- Leaders found predicting long-term developments and maintaining team capacity to be the top challenges during the pandemic. Motivating staff, however, proved to be less of an issue, as **leaders reported staff willingness to do things differently** and adapt to new circumstances. Perhaps given the efforts of staff in the face of widespread disruption, **staff wellbeing tops the list of priority activities for higher education leaders** over the next couple of years, together with navigating financial uncertainty.

- All **respondents feel significant change is needed in at least one area of their university activity over the next 18 months.** Over 80% of leaders report that their institution will need significant changes or complete overhaul to adapt to financial pressures, and to changing modes of teaching. Despite this, **85% of leaders are confident in the ability of their institution to adapt to change and competition** over the next few years (80% reported the same in 2019).
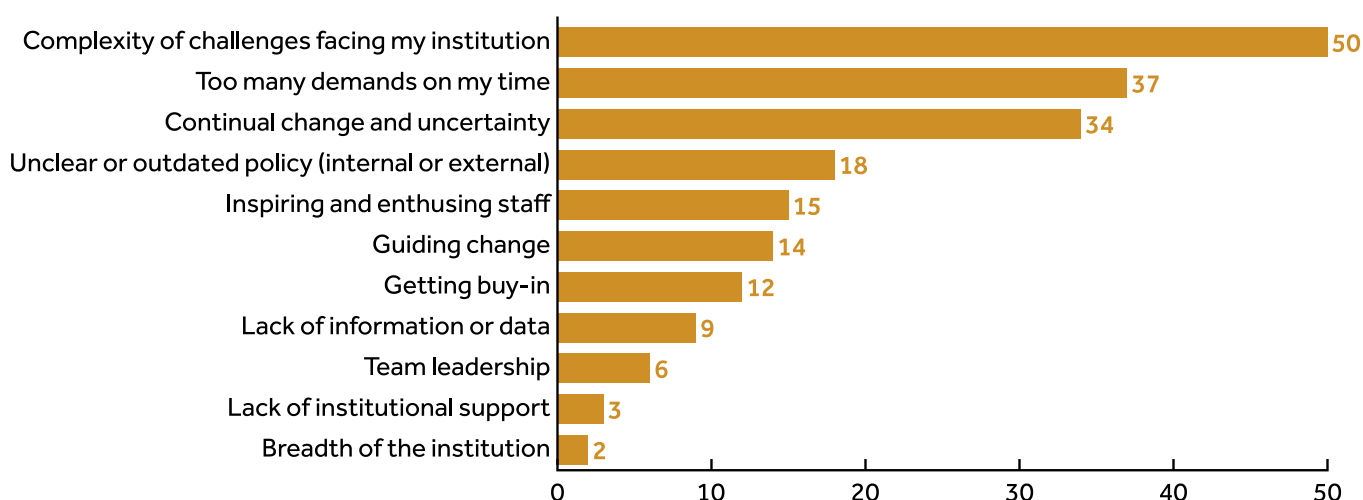
Part one:

the impact of the pandemic on leaders

The complexity of issues facing universities is the top challenge for higher education leaders – as was the case pre-pandemic

Figure 1:

Leaders ranked the top three challenges they face. The graph shows weighted responses.
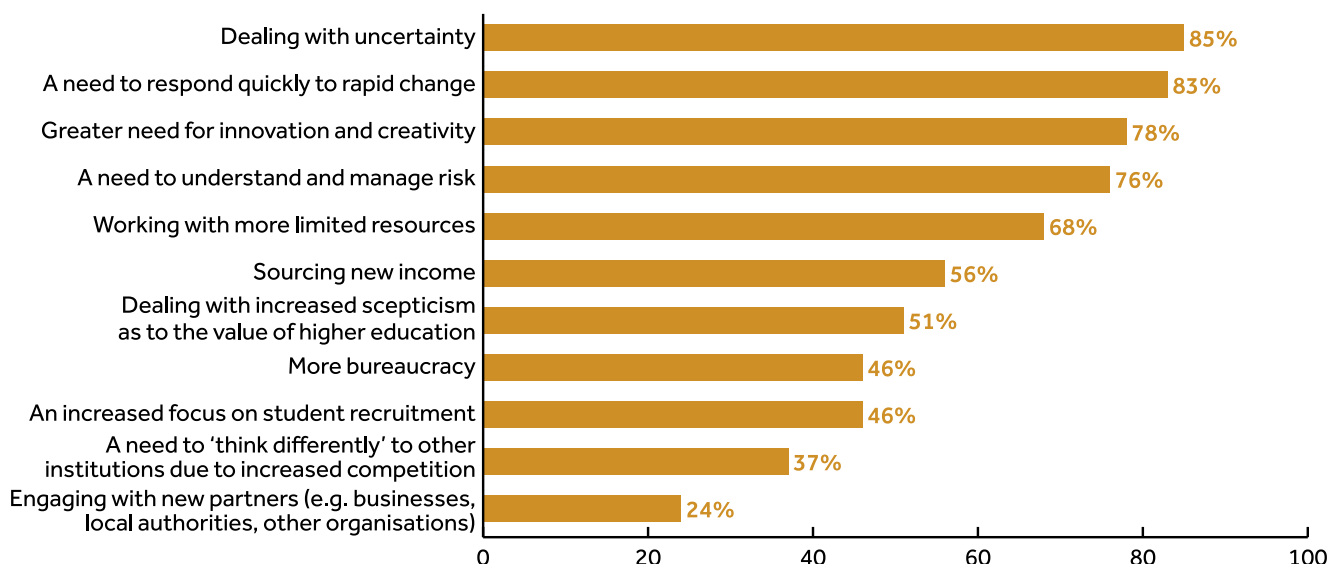

The external forces buffeting institutions are occupying the attention of higher education leaders. The top challenges are the complexity of challenges facing their institutions (50%), too many demands on their time (37%), and dealing with continual change and uncertainty (34%). While the pandemic provides a ready explanation for these challenges, the top three are unchanged from our 2019 survey. As such, continual change and complex challenges have dominated the agenda of higher education leaders for at least the past five years.

Internal issues such as leading teams (6%), securing institutional support (3%), and managing broad and diverse organisations (2%) rank lower, suggesting that universities as organisations were able to adapt well to rapidly shifting circumstances – at least from the perspective of senior leaders.

As expected, dealing with uncertainty has intensified since the start of the pandemic

Figure 2:

Leaders were asked how the nature of leadership has changed over the past 18 months. The graph shows the percentage who found a factor more of a challenge than before the pandemic.

Factor	%
Dealing with uncertainty	85%
A need to respond quickly to rapid change	83%
Greater need for innovation and creativity	78%
A need to understand and manage risk	76%
Working with more limited resources	68%
Sourcing new income	56%
Dealing with increased scepticism as to the value of higher education	51%
More bureaucracy	46%
An increased focus on student recruitment	46%
A need to 'think differently' to other institutions due to increased competition	37%
Engaging with new partners (e.g. businesses, local authorities, other organisations)	24%

All respondents felt that the nature of leadership has changed since the start of the pandemic. Dealing with uncertainty has intensified for 85% of leaders, and 83% report a greater need to respond quickly to rapid change.

For most respondents, these factors presented a similar challenge or were more of a challenge than before the pandemic, with one exception: a fifth of leaders reported that bureaucracy is less of a concern.
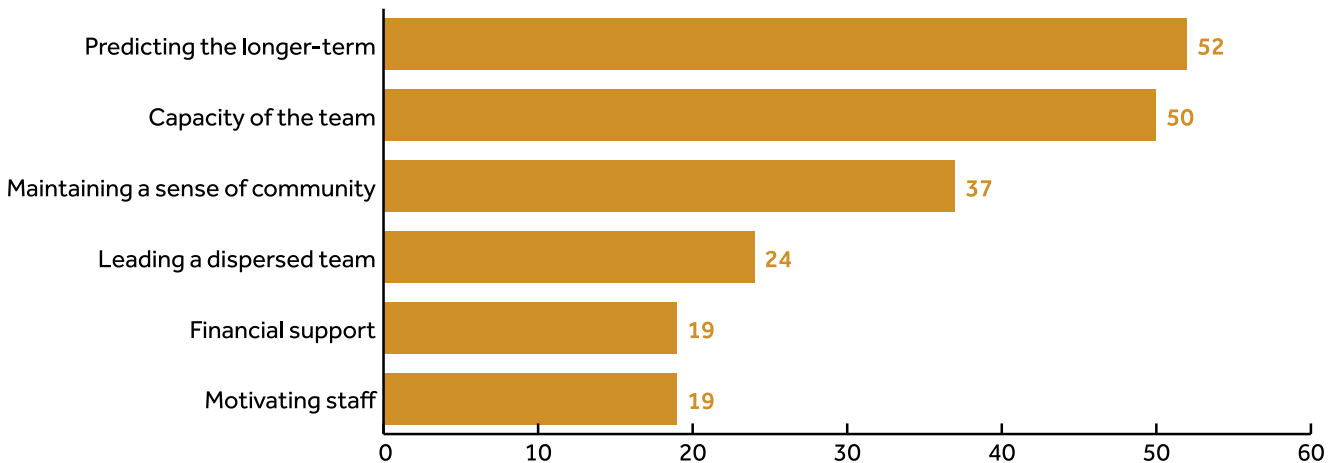
In our 2019 survey, a need to 'think differently' to other institutions due to increased competition topped the list (86%). This year, pressure to stand out has intensified for only 37% of respondents. Combined with the decline in pressure to engage with new partners (from 69% to 24%), this suggests leaders are focused on navigating their institutions through the turbulence, and less preoccupied with the 'traditional' challenges of managing a higher education institution – such as recruiting students.

Anticipating long-term developments and ensuring the capacity of teams were the top challenges for leaders during the pandemic

Figure 3:

Leaders ranked the top three challenges they faced during the pandemic. The graph shows weighted responses.

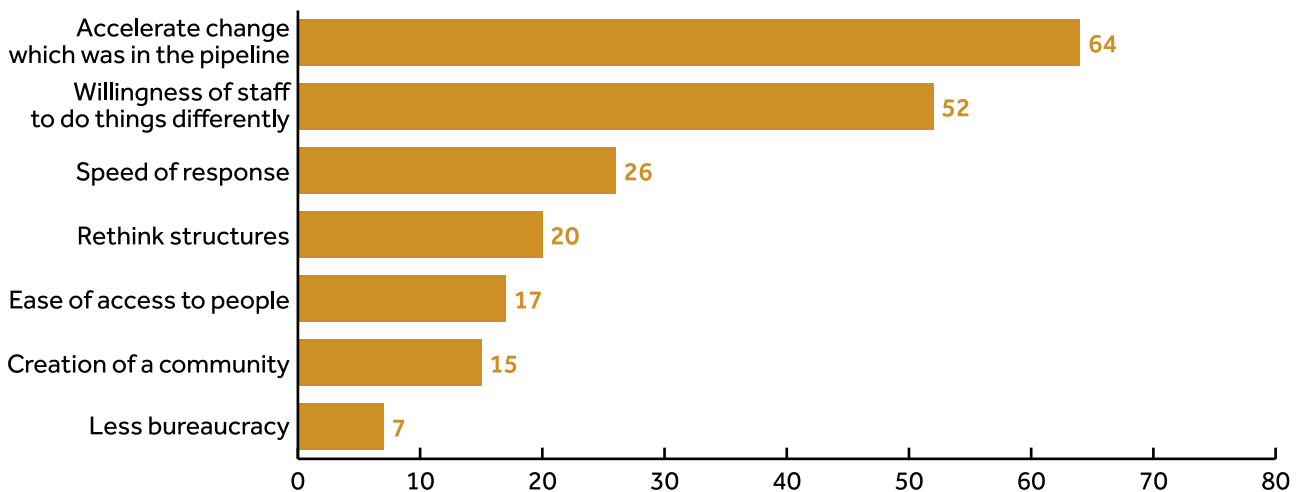| Challenge	Value
Predicting the longer-term	52
Capacity of the team	50
Maintaining a sense of community	37
Leading a dispersed team	24
Financial support	19
Motivating staff	19

Leaders found predicting long-term developments (52%) and maintaining team capacity (50%) were the top challenges during the pandemic. In common with many dispersed and dislocated organisations, maintaining a sense of community presented a challenge (37%). Motivating staff, however, proved to be less of an issue, with leaders reporting staff willingness to do things differently and adapt to new circumstances (see figure 4).

Accelerating changes already in the pipeline was the biggest opportunity emerging from the pandemic for leaders

Figure 4:

Leaders ranked the top three opportunities that emerged during the pandemic. The graph shows weighted responses.

Opportunity	Value
Accelerate change which was in the pipeline	64
Willingness of staff to do things differently	52
Speed of response	26
Rethink structures	20
Ease of access to people	17
Creation of a community	15
Less bureaucracy	7

Much has been written about a decade's worth of change taking place in 18 months, especially around the use of digital technologies and the role of estates in the student experience and in teaching, and structures and routines of staff working. Leaders reported the acceleration of previously identified changes as the biggest opportunity from the pandemic (64%), helped by the flexibility and open-mindedness of staff (52%). Changes identified include forging entrepreneurial opportunities with new and existing partners.
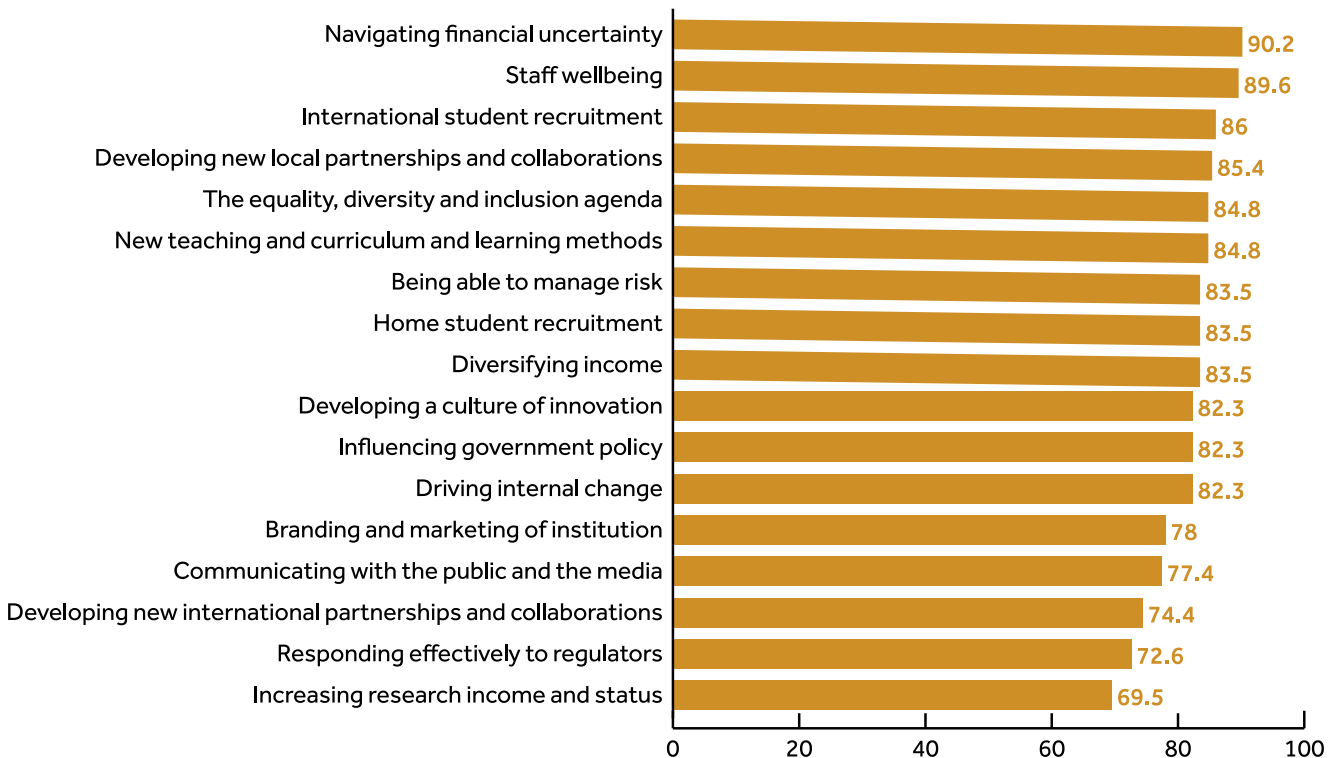
The lower ranking for rethinking structures (20%) compared to implementing changes already in the pipeline suggests that many of the developments taking place in universities were likely to have taken place in some form anyway – albeit at a slower pace.

Navigating financial uncertainty and ensuring staff wellbeing top the list of priority activities for higher education leaders over the next couple of years

Figure 5:

Leaders rated how important different activities are likely to be for higher education leaders over the next couple of years. The graph shows weighted responses.

Activity	Score
Navigating financial uncertainty	90.2
Staff wellbeing	89.6
International student recruitment	86
Developing new local partnerships and collaborations	85.4
The equality, diversity and inclusion agenda	84.8
New teaching and curriculum and learning methods	84.8
Being able to manage risk	83.5
Home student recruitment	83.5
Diversifying income	83.5
Developing a culture of innovation	82.3
Influencing government policy	82.3
Driving internal change	82.3
Branding and marketing of institution	78
Communicating with the public and the media	77.4
Developing new international partnerships and collaborations	74.4
Responding effectively to regulators	72.6
Increasing research income and status	69.5

We asked how important a range of activities will be for higher education leaders over the next few years. All are seen as important: the lowest ranked activity still scores 69.5%. Navigating financial uncertainty tops the list, as it did in our 2019 survey.

Perhaps in appreciation of the willingness of staff to do things differently and the role they have played during the pandemic, or an understanding of the toll the past 18 months has taken on mental health and work-life balance, ensuring staff wellbeing ranks second.

Developing new local partnerships and collaborations ranks slightly higher than developing new international partnerships, but international student recruitment tops both, and places higher than in our 2019 survey, when home student recruitment was seen as a slightly higher priority activity.

"There's a significant increase in opportunities around innovation, particularly in areas of social value and cohesion, for those able to respond at pace"
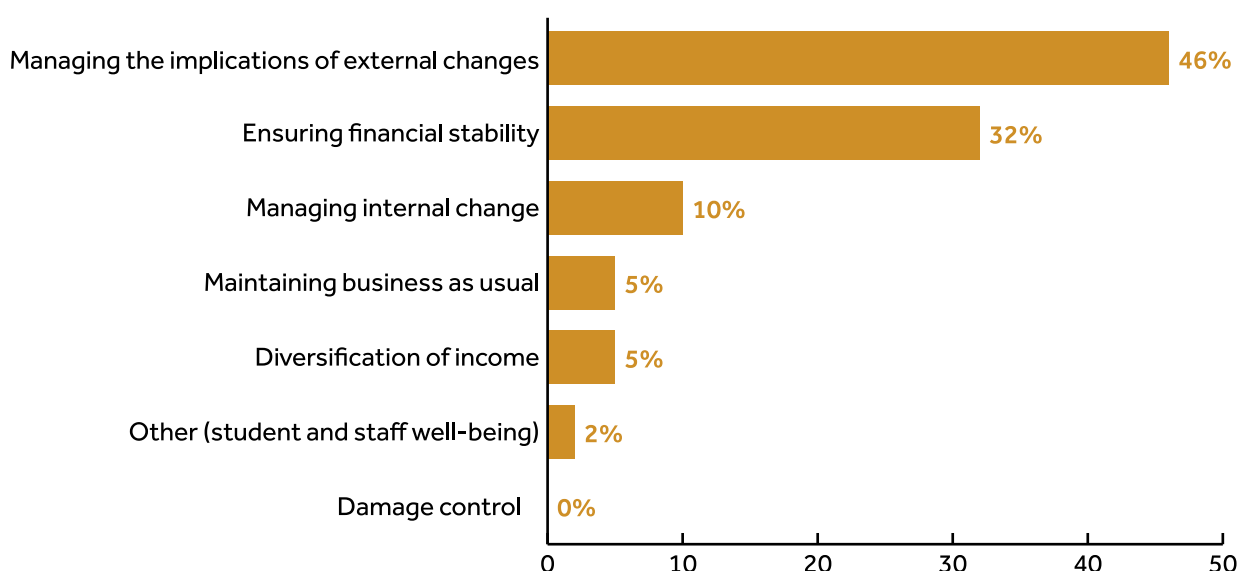
Survey respondent

the impact of the pandemic on universities

Managing the implications of external changes is the top university priority – followed by financial stability and ahead of managing internal changes

Figure 6:

Leaders picked the top priority for their institution. The graph shows the percentage that picked each option.

Priority	Percentage
Managing the implications of external changes	46%
Ensuring financial stability	32%
Managing internal change	10%
Maintaining business as usual	5%
Diversification of income	5%
Other (student and staff well-being)	2%
Damage control	0%

Managing the implications of external changes is the top university priority for leaders (46%), trailing internal changes (10%). Financial stability is the second-ranked priority for institutions (32%).

In 2019 diversification of income was the second-highest priority; this is now trumped by ensuring financial stability (although there may be overlap between the two). The rankings of managing external and internal changes have also flipped since 2019 when managing external changes ranked lower, suggesting that organisations are now more focused on dealing with broader circumstances rather than driving their own strategy.

Leaders report that staff have adapted well to the disruption of COVID-19. However, a period of policy stability is needed for universities to look inwards, and to understand and address not only the changes that have been wrought by the pandemic, but also what the continual policy change in the higher education and broader political landscapes has meant for their institutions.

Leaders believe their institution will need a complete overhaul or significant changes to adapt to changing modes of teaching (83%) and financial pressures (81%) over the next 18 months

Figure 7:

Leaders rated how their institution will need to change over the next 18 months to adapt to different agendas. The graph shows the percentage of respondents who selected 'complete overhaul needed' or 'significant changes needed' for each option, sorted by 'complete overhaul'.
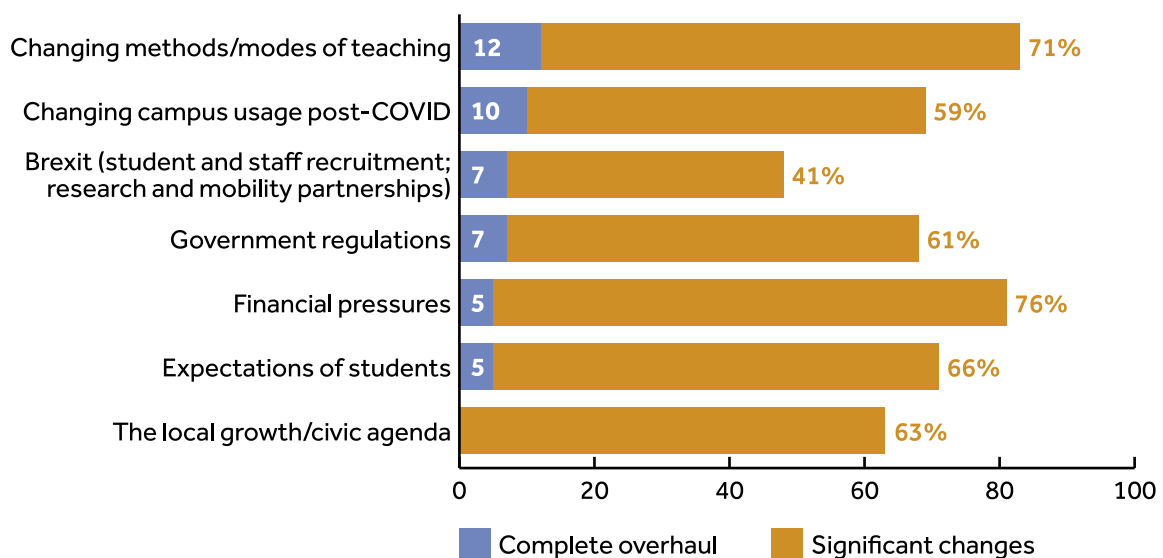
All respondents feel significant change is needed in at least one of the areas identified in our survey, showing the extent of disruption in the sector. Over 80% of leaders report that their institution will need significant changes or complete overhaul to adapt to financial pressures, and to changing modes of teaching, over the next 18 months.

These were the top two areas identified by leaders in 2019, although the proportion picking new modes of teaching has unsurprisingly increased since the pandemic and associated lockdowns.

The proportion of leaders who say their institution will need significant changes to adapt to government regulations, and to the local growth agenda, has also increased significantly since 2019.

Despite this, 85% of leaders are confident in the ability of their institution to adapt to change and competition over the next few years

Figure 8:

Leaders rated how confident they are in the ability of their institution to adapt to change and competition over the next few years. The pie chart shows the percentage that picked each option – nobody selected 'not at all' or 'not very'.

0% No, not at all   **0%** Not very

34%
Yes, very confident

15%
I'm not sure

51%
Yes, partly
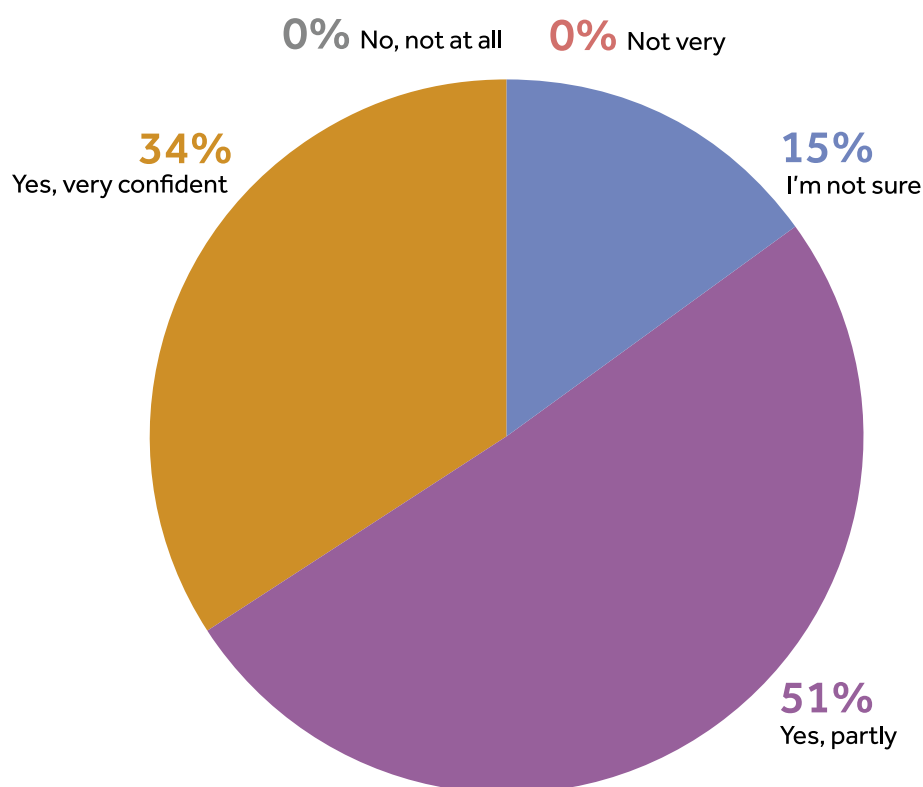
There is confidence within the sector. Despite reporting that all institutions need to make significant changes, 85% of respondents are very or partly confident in the ability of their institution to adapt to change and competition over the next few years – a similar figure to 2019 (80%). The confidence of leaders is perhaps bolstered by their university having survived two academic years marked by huge upheaval and transformation, record numbers of applications for full-time undergraduate places in the UK in 2021, and, possibly, a sense of optimism for the role of higher education in a post-pandemic economic and social recovery.

Who responded

> **During summer 2021 we surveyed:**
>
> - 41 respondents from 25 universities
>
> - 37 from the UK, and 4 from international universities
>
> - 24 senior leaders (including 5 Vice Chancellors and 13 Deputy or Pro-Vice Chancellors), 14 at Director or Head level, and 3 Professors with other leadership responsibilities
>
> - 11 MillionPlus respondents, 9 University Alliance respondents, and 2 Russell Group respondents.

About NCEE

The National Centre for Entrepreneurship in Education (NCEE) supports further and higher education to build its entrepreneurial future. NCEE believes innovative and inspiring activities led by enterprising staff create graduates equipped for an ever-changing world.

Established by the UK Government in 2004, NCEE supports organisations to develop their entrepreneurial capacity to ensure higher education remains at the forefront of enterprise and entrepreneurship. Its network spans the globe.

NCEE provides a range of services to universities and their senior leadership and practitioners. Services include:

- **Entrepreneurial Leadership training programmes.** These support leaders in further and higher education to manage change and adapt to new challenges and opportunities.

- **Benchmarking and assessment.** A strategic assessment of enterprise activity and entrepreneurial activity in universities, comparing performance against more than 60 measures, and providing unique insight along with practical recommendations, including identification of best practice.

- **Embedding enterprise in curriculum.** The Enterprising Teaching programme is designed for those in teaching and curriculum development roles who wish to develop their students through incorporating enterprise and entrepreneurial development into their teaching practice.

To speak to us about how NCEE can help your institution, please contact Ceri Nursaw (**ceri.nursaw@ncee.org.uk**).