

Job Description – Associate Director, Higher Education and Skills

About Public First

Public First is a specialist consultancy, helping charities, philanthropists, public sector bodies and global brands improve public policy. Based in London, we have worked in more than two dozen international markets. We are part think tank, part strategic consultancy, part polling company, and part communications agency. In other words, we bring together the different disciplines that make policy happen and work.

We specialise in producing ideas and analysis that are rigorous, persuasive, and rooted in political reality.

We are hired because we take seriously those things that policymakers in Government and elsewhere obsess over:

- Policy and research – we offer services including research and analysis, economic modelling, and detailed report writing.
- Opinion research – quantitative and qualitative data run through almost every project we do, as we consider the impact of policy change on the public. We are members of the British Polling Council and Company Partners of the Market Research Society.
- Communications and campaigns – we help organisations with the creation of communications strategies and campaigns on the most complex policy issues, where a detailed understanding of policy really matters.

Our team has been recruited from the most senior levels of government, the civil service, Parliament, political campaigns, think tanks, opinion research and the media. Our staff have been active in each of the main political parties. We are divided politically, but united by a desire to do rigorous, work that has a real world impact on policy and its implementation. We believe our differences make our work better.

Put simply, we put intellectual energy behind solving some of the trickiest economic and social problems in the UK today.

And we want you to join us.

Education

Education is one of the major areas of specialism for Public First. Many of the most senior team at the company – including Rachel Wolf, James Frayne, Jonathan Simons Ed Dorrell and Reza Schwitzer- have all worked in and around government in education policy for the last fifteen years. Between us, we have worked directly with and for or advised the last four Prime Ministers, seven Education Secretaries, and numerous junior Ministers.

We work across all phases of education, including Higher Education. Our client list in HE includes representative bodies and mission groups; government departments; longstanding universities; charities and foundations who work in the sector; and LEPs and Local Authorities on skills and

regeneration. We have worked with some of the most well recognized names in the education space in the past three years.

The role

We are looking for someone to come and join the education practice as an Associate Director, with a specialism in Higher Education and the broader skills agenda.

You should be comfortable thinking through strategy, conducting analysis, writing compelling reports, and be excited by interacting with experts in other disciplines and fields. You should be interested in how things actually happen, and the difference between well and poorly executed policy. You should enjoy the challenge of understanding our clients' desires, and thinking through how that maps to public and political priorities. And you should be capable of running projects on your own, and contributing to the strategic leadership of the practice.

You will make more of a difference than in many other agencies – and often more of a difference than in government.

We have an in-depth training programme and regularly train our policy specialists in opinion research and other disciplines. We actively encourage people to do additional courses and training when they are with us, and support this financially. We also encourage people to write under their own name, and develop their own policy profile. Almost every senior person in Public First is a regular commentator and writer.

The role will include some or all of the following key **responsibilities**:

- *Leading or supporting individual projects and liaison with the client within the education practice* under the supervision of the Head of Practice, but with significant day to day autonomy and responsibility for execution and delivery of work. This will include policy writing (internally and for publication), data analysis, commissioning and managing junior staff and meetings and discussions with external stakeholders in Westminster and elsewhere.
- *Providing expertise in particular areas of higher education.* We are knowledge junkies! We want a culture of expertise within the organisation, and to learn from each other about all elements of policy within higher education (and other areas, as well)
- *Contributing to broader projects within the practice and across different practices* – for example, on a piece of work around child health, or on a campaign or media relations piece of work which will include collaboration with specialists in these areas across Public First.
- *Maintaining client relationships*, including ongoing broader support, advice and counsel on developments in Westminster, and politics and policy more broadly.
- *Scoping of and developing future project work and engaging with potential clients.* Although there is no 'sales target', everyone will have scope to develop new areas of policy which they want to work in and have opportunities to engage with new clients.
- *Maintaining and further building strong networks across the education sector in the UK* – in government, educational institutions, think tanks and policy organisations, corporations and third sector organisations, media, and others. For more senior staff, we encourage everyone to build and maintain their own profile and brand including by speaking at events, writing for publications, and offering thought leadership more broadly.

- *Working alongside colleagues who offer specialisms in policy, communications, and campaigns* and who can contribute to education projects. There will be significant opportunities to grow expertise across all these domains.

The role will require the following **skills and experience**:

- *Experience within the higher education field, or skills policy, from a policy or communications perspective.* The single most important thing we will be looking for is someone who understands higher education policy. We are relaxed about where this expertise may have come from, or how many years' experience you have. But we will be looking for someone who – for example – enjoys reading, *Wonkhe* on a daily basis, or contributes to discussion face to face or online about higher education policy or skills led economic growth. We are unashamed about being *wonks* ourselves and we want someone to help contribute to this mission
- *Deep familiarity with government, Westminster and policymaking and politics.* This could similarly have been gained through direct experience in politics and government or through working alongside them; regardless of the route, successful candidates will need to demonstrate above all that they understand how government and policymaking works.
- *Ability to write clearly, incisively and precisely about policy issues* – including the ability to translate complex policy topics into language accessible to educated laypeople.
- *Ability to handle quantitative data* – Public First employs economists and expert data modellers but all staff are required to be able to conduct, for example, data analysis functions in Excel up to publishable standard and to be comfortable working with large datasets and raw numbers and to be able to draw conclusions from them.
- *The ability to be able to present, verbally, conclusions from our work.* This could be to clients (including very senior individuals), or to prospective clients, or to MPs and policymakers, or to an expert education audience. We are looking for someone who is comfortable and enthusiastic about discussing education policy and what it means.
- *A willingness to work flexibly across a small organisation* – including getting involved in different types of role within a project (for example, running focus groups, helping out on polling questions or psychological profiling or helping craft press releases) as well as policy analysis, and, where needed, contributing to projects running in other subject areas.
- *Ideally, a strong degree in a relevant subject area.* However, we are very willing to consider candidates who come from a non-graduate background who can demonstrate the skills and experiences required to fulfil the job description.

We value diversity and encourage applications from all groups. We all work a mix of in the office and at home, with most people working in the office two days a week. Many of us, including the founders, have young children and we work hard to be family friendly. Given universities, colleges and local government bodies are all across the country, we are also open to discussions about job holders being permanently based in another area of the country. International travel and work would be possible for future projects.

Salaries will depend on experience and level of seniority but to give a sense of scale, Associate Director starting salaries will typically *start from* £50,000-£55,000, with considerable flexibility depending on experience and skill.

If you're interested, please send a copy of a CV, a short covering letter outlining how you fit the criteria and two examples of writing¹ to contact@publicfirst.co.uk.

¹ We are relaxed about whether this is writing you have already done in a professional capacity, or personally, or indeed writing you do specifically for this job advert. Similarly, in terms of purpose, this can be something written for publication in eg Wonkhe, or a private note to a client or to a board or to a CEO, or something from your own personal blog or LinkedIn – it really doesn't matter. The topic can be on anything you want within the broad sphere of Higher Education, and should be around 500-1000 words long and concern a particular policy question within HE, and your summary of the situation and some analysis. We will be looking both at what you say (though there is no 'right answer', we are interested in your analytical take regardless of what it is) and how you say it.