

Associate Director - Higher Education

Higher Education - discuss!

The UK Higher Education sector is at one of the most interesting potential inflection points of the last twenty years or more. Many of the tenets which underpin the English system in particular - a focus on student choice, competition between institutions, and a regulatory system focussed on protecting student interests in a quasi market - are more contested now than they have been for a generation. The financial pressures placed on institutions have never been higher. Yet at the same time, the research agenda pursued by universities has never been more exciting, with new discoveries in scientific fields underpinned by British researchers working in collaboration promising a better quality of life for all. Universities are thinking locally, nationally and globally, all at the same time - and juggling relations with new mayors, new MPs, and a government that on the one hand has a very clear direction of travel for the sector, and on the other hand appears to have put many of the issues in the "too difficult for now" box.

Globally, we see how central universities are to some of the biggest challenges being faced in societies and political systems around the world - whether that is how to grow new jobs, how to move away from hydrocarbons, how to improve areas of countries which are less developed. And universities are also central to debates which perhaps they might not have chosen - around how to balance free speech rights with protection of minorities; the disconnect by education status between graduates and non graduates; the pressure on immigration numbers in many developed nations because of international student flows; and whether mass higher education and its alleged liberal bias can survive contact with conservative administrations.

We are tremendously excited by the issues raised around higher education, globally. And at Public First, we are playing our part by leading research and policy think pieces on many issues raised.

For example, we are:

- Running a full-scale inquiry into the Government's next mission for widening participation to UK universities
- Working with a University senior leadership team on their civic university strategy and local engagement

- Designing a sector-wide reputation strategy and exploring public opinion across all aspects of HE, ahead of the next general election
- Working with two universities and associated mayoral combined authorities on innovation led local economic growth strategies
- Designing the biggest ever (we think!) quantitative research programme into attitudes towards mathematics in universities and beyond

But as we sit and think of the other things we would love to do, the list gets even longer! For example, some of the things we are thinking about are:

- Given the experience of Australian and Canadian elections, where student migration became inextricably caught up in wider political debates about migration, is there any end to debates about international students here in the UK - and what might this mean for what a left of centre government might do?
- "You can see the computer age everywhere but the productivity stats". Is this also true of the spillover benefits that are claimed by HE? Why is there still significant social and economic disadvantage in the environs of major cities in the UK which have multiple universities? In other words, why isn't the University of Manchester making Oldham richer and why isn't UCL making Tower Hamlets richer?
- Are we about to return to the era of securonomics, as Rachel Reeves discussed before the election? What does that mean for international collaboration on research in HE? And are we worried about cutting ties with China because of international research collaboration, or because that's where all the money is?
- What would happen - really happen - if a university went under? A significant proportion of the Scottish government and higher education establishment is currently focussed on saving Dundee. What would happen if a similar thing happened in three, or five, or seven universities at the same time?
- What does the age of AI actually mean for universities? In particular, is it possible that the whole concept of teaching and learning, and advanced scholarship, is under strain? Will people simply not think they need a degree for the labour market anymore?

If you, too, think about questions like this. Or if you have your own questions. Or you think some or much that has been written above is simply wrong - then great! You are the kind of person we want to talk to. Please read on....

About Public First

Public First is a boutique policy, research and strategy consultancy. Our team includes policy and communications experts, as well as economists, strategists, digital experts and campaigners, many of whom have worked in the heart of governments, academia, think tanks, and industry.

Headquartered in London, we work with global companies, governments, institutions and foundations around the world to tackle major public policy and strategic challenges. Our work is to help these organisations navigate government and public policy, and to help shape better policy thinking as a result.

Since February 2025, we are part of the Stonehaven Global Holdings Group (SHGH). We have offices in London, Washington DC, Singapore, Dubai, and Jakarta.

Across our business, we focus on a few main areas of work, each headed up by a highly-experienced Head of Practice:

- Education and Skills
- Technology, Media and Telecoms
- Energy and Environment
- Data, Impact and Economic Modelling
- Housing and Infrastructure

Within each area of work, and more generally, we offer a range of services. We are, in effect, part think tank, part strategic advisory consultancy, part polling company, and part communications and public affairs agency:

- Policy and research – we offer research and analysis, economic modelling, writing of publications, thought leadership, and strategic counsel.
- Opinion research – we offer accredited British Polling Council quantitative research including opinion polls, and a wide range of Market Research Society qualitative opinion research methods including focus groups.
- Communications and campaigns – we offer a full service of campaign work including grass roots campaigning execution for clients, as well as more traditional media and communications support including press releases, op-ed drafting and placement, and select committee training and media training.

Put simply, we put intellectual energy behind solving some of the trickiest political, economic and social problems in the UK today. And we want you to join us!



Education within Public First

Education is one of the major areas of specialism for Public First. Many of the most senior team at the company have worked in and around government or the opposition in education policy for the last twenty years or more. Between us, we have advised Prime Ministers, Leaders of the Opposition, Education Secretaries and their Shadows, and numerous junior Ministers.

We work across all phases of education. Our clients include universities and multi academy trusts, national and local government, charities, foundations, trade associations, and businesses large and small who work in education. Across the practice, we have worked with some of the most well recognised names in the education space in the past three years.



You can see brief profiles of the existing education team (currently 12 people) here: <https://www.publicfirst.co.uk/team>

We organise the practice into three main areas:

- Schools:** We work with individual schools, multi academy trusts, education charities, and foundations, with projects covering most areas of the schools policy landscape. Examples of previous projects include our [Commission on Teacher Retention](#); the [Coalition for Youth Mental Health in Schools](#); and our work on the [National Tutoring Programme](#).



- **Higher education:** We work with a number of UK universities and mission groups, covering most aspects of post-18 education, as well as research and innovation policy, in UK HE. We are increasingly looking to grow and expand our profile overseas. Previous projects include our work on [public attitudes to tuition fees](#), [public understanding of R&D](#), [polling on international students](#), and our evaluation of the [Office for Students Uni-Connect](#) programme.
- **Skills:** We work on a number of projects across the broader skills landscape, for large corporates or regional and national bodies, across a broad range of sector areas. Previous examples include our work for [Phoenix Insights](#) on tackling economic inactivity; the [Yorkshire Financial Services Commission](#); and our report for the

The role

We are looking for someone with specific higher education expertise and experience in HE policy to join the team as an Associate Director.

As set out above, we are working on some of the biggest questions facing the higher education sector, both in the UK and abroad, across the full span of higher education policy. But we want to do even more, particularly in research and innovation. Particularly as Public First sets up its US office in Washington DC, and building on our existing work in Asia and the Middle East, we're also looking for opportunities to expand our work internationally.

We're interested in finding someone who is a self confessed higher education wonk to help us grow and develop our higher education offer. You'll likely currently be working in house at a UK university or mission group, in a think tank looking at higher education, skills or research, or in a role in the civil service or regulator which covers a higher education brief. We recruit for skill and fit within the organisation – and will work with the people we make offers to, to ensure that they are supported within the company in a way that suits everyone.

Our ideal candidate would be someone who had:

- **Experience working in higher education policy.** The single most important thing we will be looking for is someone who understands, and can write clearly about, higher education policy. We are relaxed about where this expertise may have come from, and whether there are specific areas of specialism - though we would be particularly interested in candidates working in research and innovation policy, or on international/global higher education.

- **Familiarity with government, policymaking and politics.** This could have been gained through direct experience in politics and government, or through adjacent sectors. Regardless of the route, successful candidates will need to demonstrate above all that they understand how policy is developed.
- **Expertise in particular areas of higher education policy.** 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 education (and other areas, as well).
- **The ability to communicate clearly, incisively, and precisely.** This includes the ability to translate complex policy topics into accessible language, and confidence when presenting conclusions from your work to senior stakeholders such as clients, policymakers or other experts.
- **Experience managing cross-functional projects.** You should feel comfortable working with colleagues and clients to deliver multifaceted research projects on time, and to a high standard. An ideal candidate will have demonstrable experience managing complex projects and/or campaigns.
- **The ability to handle quantitative data.** Public First employs economists and expert data modellers but all staff are expected to be able to work with large datasets and raw numbers, or have the enthusiasm and motivation to learn how to do so.

At Associate Director (AD) level, you will likely have 5+ years relevant policy experience, and be able to comfortably and confidently own a portfolio of clients and projects (with support from Directors and Head of Practice). Examples of responsibilities at this level include:

- **Client and project management:** ADs work with significant autonomy and manage a number of projects and client relationships across the practice. They have day-to-day responsibility for client and project management, overseeing progression and ensuring outputs are delivered at a high quality and on time.
- **Research and policy expertise:** ADs have a clear specialism within the education policy brief, and are responsible for scoping projects, drafting policy reports and briefings, as well as undertaking in-depth research. This includes an ability to understand and undertake research using qualitative and quantitative methods (with support and training provided, as required).

- **New business and client development:** ADs contribute to and support the wider development of new business across the firm, and proactively maintain and build strong networks across relevant sectors.

Location and salary

The role is London based (we have offices in Westminster) but if Covid has taught us anything, it's that we are flexible. At the moment we are all in the office Mondays and Thursdays, with flexibility for people to be in the office or at home, as is their preference, for the other days.

Given the geographic spread of many of our clients, we are also open to discussions about the post holder being permanently based in another area of the country, if they are willing to travel on occasions to be with the rest of the team.

Salary will depend on experience. The salary band for this role is £54,000-£70,000. We have significant flexibility for the right candidate, depending on professional background and experience.

We particularly welcome applications from disabled and Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) candidates.

If you're interested, please send a CV and cover letter (including links to any writing or external materials about yourself, if helpful or relevant) to jessica.lister@publicfirst.co.uk. Please outline clearly which areas of higher education policy you have most experience in, and which you'd be most interested in working in – as well as explaining what you think you could bring to the team and role.

We will be considering applications on a rolling basis until the 16th May– and encourage applicants to submit as soon as possible.