Session Title:	**Keynote- One Year on**
Speaker(s):	**Professor Ken Sloan**
Chair:	**Reena Littlehales**
Reporter:	**Becci Williams & Wisia Rossi**

Speaker/Institution Bio/Information:	**Vice-Chancellor and Chief Executive Officer- Harper Adams University** **Chair of Guild HE**
Overview/Aim of session:	**Overview of the year so far, opportunity for us to ask him questions using the slido on the screen about what we might be seeing going forwards. Big trend and institutional change going forwards also.**
Workshop Content	**Q&A from audience to Ken, both from pre-populated Slido and inputting on the day questions and questions from the room**
Case Studies/Examples:	**NA**
Scenarios/Roundtable discussions:	**NA- it was one big Q&A with the whole of the delegates**
Questions and Answers:	1. **Saw a super-uni merger last year, financial constraints. Are we expecting to see universities collapsing due to financial pressures, will the government intervene if this is the case?** The Office for Students has acknowledged that some universities are in financial distress, distinguishing between institutions that have managed challenges through difficult but proactive decisions, and those hit by sudden, unmanageable shocks (which have not yet

	occurred). Some universities have responded by merging or collaborating, a long-standing feature of the sector. Government and regulators prioritise ensuring students can continue their education, even if that means transferring elsewhere, but universities matter beyond teaching: they are major employers and central to communities and local economies. Financial responsibility is essential because universities manage both public and students' money, and instability risks staff, students, and partners. While policy direction may bring some stability, the sector should not expect a return to a fully settled or predictable environment. 2. **How are we promoting to those that we work with that degrees are still a good option that is valuable and worthwhile for them to do?** The value of higher education is increasingly being questioned by government narratives that prioritise job-linked degrees and skills, which risks implying that other degrees, especially in the humanities, are less valuable. This is problematic, particularly since students largely fund their own education and should not be steered too narrowly by the state. While a focus on skills, flexibility, and varied study pathways is welcome, higher education should be seen as offering multiple equally valid routes that support both employment and broader societal contribution. The government's messaging has not been consistent, and many people interpret it as devaluing full-time university degrees. 3. **What could we do with WP students who are wanting to go into those Arts & humanities areas?** Perceptions of debt and unclear messaging about arts and humanities particularly deter widening-participation students. Universities need strong, positive storytelling, especially through alumni examples to show the diverse and successful career paths graduates take. Early educational choices are not life-defining, as jobs and skills needs change over time. The real value lies in being educated and skilled, and discouraging people from pursuing available pathways will worsen existing problems around unemployment and underemployment. 4. **Do you think there are too many universities in the UK today?** Drawing on their experience working in Australia, Ken explains that the UK and Australian higher education systems are broadly comparable in scale, but Australia has undergone significant consolidation over the past 30

	years, with many smaller and specialist institutions absorbed into larger universities. While collaboration through mergers or shared structures can strengthen institutions and make better use of limited resources, the assumption that bigger institutions are inherently better is misguided. A healthy system depends on diversity in institutional size and focus to preserve student choice, and collaborations are best pursued proactively from a position of strength rather than imposed later through financial pressure. 5. **How do we avoid being the ones cut from the mass job cuts and what can we do to make the most of our jobs to stand out and ensure we are safe?** The advice is to think in terms of a long-term career rather than a fixed job, and to build resilience by broadening skills and experience. Taking sideways moves, temporary roles, or exposure to different functions can increase flexibility and collaboration without abandoning a core career path. Developing a wider skill set helps protect against restructuring and creates more options. It's also important to stay visible by clearly communicating your role and value to senior leaders, especially during challenging times. As yourself, do you see yourself in a job or do you see yourself in a career? 6. **For student finance for Scottland, is this realistic to have keep this model or sustain this in or do you more towards a graduate contribution.** The funding balance differs sharply across systems: Australia had roughly a 50/50 split between students and the state, while in England and Wales a large share of student loans is ultimately borne by the state. These choices reflect different government values- Scotland prioritises avoiding financial barriers to access, while England and Wales adopted a demand-led, fee-based model that has effectively reduced funding in real terms. Scotland may face pressure to change if institutions cannot access essential resources or if caps limit access for some communities. Overall, the UK now represents a live comparison between different funding models, but there is not yet enough evidence to fully understand their long-term impacts on students, staff, and outcomes. 7. **Do you think that in line with the Scottish policy student capacity may see a return on those to**

	English and Welsh institutions well. During a media discussion about introducing student number caps, the argument was made that caps would not solve concerns about larger universities recruiting students at the expense of lower-tariff institutions. Instead, caps would limit choice, create distortions in admissions, and lead to inefficient practices. A better approach is to evaluate student outcomes over the full lifecycle- retention, success, and destinations, rather than focusing solely on entry tariffs or imposing caps. 8. **LLE- Nobody is really that sure how the modular element will work- do you think it can work?** People should be able to choose different ways of being educated, but the rollout of the Lifelong Learning Entitlement (LLE) is likely to be complex and rushed, with unclear application processes and major changes to student finance required in a short timeframe. While there will be some demand for flexible, modular study, many students will still prefer full-time university education. Student feedback shows that what matters most is not flexibility or length of study, but belonging, community, and cohort identity. These aspects of the traditional university experience need to be communicated and valued more clearly alongside flexibility. 9. **Is Student Finance ultimately the route cause for the flat lining rate of students coming to university and the decline in mature student applications?** Changes to student loan repayment terms may influence decisions, but they sit within a much wider context of social and economic turbulence since the 2008 financial crisis, followed by Brexit, the pandemic, and ongoing instability. This sustained uncertainty has made people, especially mature students with caring or family responsibilities more risk-averse about disrupting employment or taking on major commitments like higher education. Student finance plays a role, but broader societal instability is a significant factor shaping choices. 10. **Do we need to change the application process to take into the fact that AI is something that students are using more and more?** AI will continue to develop faster than regulation can keep up, so education and employment need to shift from treating it as a prohibited output to recognising it as a tool people use transparently. Clear guidance should encourage honest disclosure of how AI is used, while

	preserving spaces for genuinely human creativity. The most serious concern is not text-based AI but video and deepfake technology, which raises major ethical and integrity issues. Addressing AI's impact requires a strong focus on ethics, trust, and behaviour, even as its rapid advance makes many feel unsettled by the pace of change. **11. What are the positives in the sector right now that we can take away?** The main point was really about remembering the impact of what you do. A lot of people go to work every day and the effect of their job stops at the organisation they work for. That's not the case here. The work you do shapes who gets access to opportunity, who comes into higher education, and ultimately how society develops. It can feel heavy at times, especially when there's uncertainty, change, or when people you care about are affected by job losses. That emotional weight is real. But there's also a strong reason to stay optimistic. The message was very clear: you are **societal changemakers**. Even if your institution or managers don't use that language, that's what you are. Most people in the room will have a story about someone who wouldn't have gone to university without their help and that matters. The encouragement was not to get overwhelmed by negativity or noise, but to remember the value of your role and the privilege of working with the next generation. Big change doesn't usually come from grand gestures, it comes from small, thoughtful actions that make a real difference to individuals. And that's exactly the work you do every day.
Summary/ Key takeaways:	• Financial sustainability: Some institutions face financial stress, but proactive management and collaboration (including mergers or partnerships) are preferable to crisis-driven intervention. Government priority remains student continuation rather than institutional preservation. • Value of higher education: Degrees remain valuable beyond direct job outcomes. Arts and humanities are critical to society, civic life, leadership and adaptability, not just employment pipelines. • Widening Participation: Perceptions of debt disproportionately affect WP students. Alumni stories and real-life outcomes are

	vital in challenging assumptions about arts and humanities pathways. • Sector structure: The UK does not have “too many” universities. A diverse ecosystem of large, small and specialist institutions supports student choice and resilience. Collaboration is positive; enforced consolidation is not. • Careers and job security: Staff should think in terms of careers, not fixed roles. Broad skills, adaptability and visibility within institutions build resilience during restructuring. • Scotland and student funding: Free tuition reflects social values but creates pressures via capped places and constrained resources. Long-term sustainability depends on evidence of outcomes and access. • Lifelong Learning Entitlement (LLE): Flexibility is welcome, but risks weakening cohort identity and belonging. Community and peer connection remain central to student success. • Mature students and participation: Flatlining participation is driven by broader societal turbulence and risk aversion, not just finance. • AI and applications: AI use is unavoidable. Focus should shift to ethical use, transparency and integrity rather than outright prohibition. • Positives for the sector: Higher education professionals are societal changemakers, enabling opportunity, mobility and long-term social impact despite current challenges.