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## **A Strategy to Avoid Geographic and Subject Cold Spots in the East of England**

Proposal for Higher Education Provision  
by the University of East Anglia  
UCU Branch

**UCU**

University and College Union

This UCU brief – written by the UEA UCU Branch - is a regional contribution to the debate on addressing geographic and subject ‘cold spots’ in UK higher education. Firstly, it is an example of regional approaches that might be an inspiration for other regional and devolved nation models. Secondly, as a UK-wide union, we are not arguing for an East of England only solution, but that this could form part of a UCU response around increased HE funding and maintaining provision.

## SUMMARY

The East of England is uniquely exposed to the structural and systemic crisis facing the higher education sector. In the current climate where 124 institutions across the sector, around 45% of all providers, are expected to be grappling with financial deficits by the end of the 2025-26 financial year, our regional situation is especially precarious. A report published in July 2026 placed both the University of East Anglia (UEA) and Essex in the bottom half of UK universities in terms of financial sustainability, while the University of Suffolk is marked as being in the bottom quarter.<sup>1</sup> We are in a situation where large, comparable, multidisciplinary, anchor institutions in research and teaching, having undergone several rounds of redundancies and restructures are currently facing fundamental questions about their sustainability and what their overall provision might look like.

The management response to the crisis in higher education has been a drive towards "specialisation" that is already limiting subject choice and degree options open to students. This is particularly alarming for our region. As university managers focus on specialisation driven purely by financial headlines and blunt tools such as "staff-student ratio," we risk ending up with constricted institutions unable to meet

the employability, civic, social, creative and innovative needs of our region or the research to answer the urgent questions that define our changing world. In a region built on connections, the value of our universities is defined by the breadth and the diversity of their offer as well as the contributions they can make across disciplines.

This is why we, the University and College Union (UCU) at UEA, are calling for a **Minimum Provision Guarantee for the East of England**. Put simply, this would be a public, funded commitment that it will be possible to continue to study core set of subjects – including nursing, teacher training, modern languages, the sciences, and art and humanities – in our region. Without this kind of intervention, we will be left with a form of "specialisation" that will undermine our regional offer and have damaging knock on effects for aspirations and growth in our region.

## INTRODUCTION

Higher education in the East of England is under threat. As university leaders axe courses and provision in a desperate attempt to balance individual balance sheets, there is no real sense of what this means for our region as a whole. The University of Essex is currently in the process of closing its Southend campus and cutting around 400 posts, while UEA has lost more than 600 jobs across two rounds of redundancies in the last two years, while posting a further deficit of £6.8 million this year. The University of Suffolk has been through multiple rounds of redundancy affecting all service areas. Norwich University of the Arts and Anglia Ruskin University, though currently in stronger financial positions than their regional neighbours, operate in the same funding environment. While these cuts might seem 'logical' when viewed at the level of an individual institution, there has been a real lack of consideration of how these decisions are reshaping the higher education landscape across the East of England – where HE provision is dispersed and there are relatively few dual-intensive institutions. This brief sets out why this represents a significant risk and how we believe our region's Members of Parliament should support proposals to address these challenges.

## KEY FINDINGS AND ARGUMENT

The British Academy and the cross-party House of Commons Education Committee have both recently drawn attention to emerging geographic and subject "cold spots" for specific subject areas, while the Committee has identified "an absence of strategic

oversight of regional higher education provision".<sup>2</sup> Given our geography and the nature of the HE institutions in our region, it is clear that the East of England is particularly vulnerable to these trends. If there was ever a potential HE "cold spot", East Anglia is it.

At present, each institution in our region is looking at its subject provision and finances on their own individual terms. There is currently no mechanism, or incentive, to ask what our region will be left with after our individual institutions "right size" and "specialise". This means that if two or three universities in the East each independently retreat from the same disciplines, there will no longer be an option to study specific subjects and areas in East Anglia as a whole, outside of an elite institution like the University of Cambridge.

This is especially worrying at a time when almost a third of prospective students are planning to study from home, driven by a maintenance system that has lost a fifth of its real value and now covers barely half of what it actually costs to live.<sup>3</sup> For young people in Norfolk, Suffolk, Essex and Cambridgeshire – particularly those from less affluent backgrounds – a course that disappears from our regional HEIs is an essential a course they're not allowed to study and closes potential career pathways open to them.

Nationally, the higher education sector contributes around £265 billion to the UK economy and supports 768,000 full-time equivalent jobs.<sup>4</sup> In the East of England specifically, universities generate £9.6 billion in total economic activity each year, contribute £5.6 billion in gross value added to the UK economy, and support 56,900 full-time equivalent jobs across the region.<sup>5</sup> Our regional universities also currently train the nurses, teachers, doctors and allied health professionals – with current enrolment figures meaning that universities in the East will train over 14,000 nurses, over 3,000 medics and around 6,500 teachers between now and 2029.<sup>6</sup> Reducing provision in specific subject areas diminishes our skilled workforce and has the potential to harm our regional economy - potentially risking nursing and health related disciplines; teacher training; modern languages; sciences that directly inform our world leading food, health and environmental sectors; and the arts, humanities, media and design disciplines that sustain the East of England's creative and cultural industries.

There has been a tendency across the East of England for the arts and humanities to be the first to bear the brunt of cuts. This tendency not only has economic effects on the creative and cultural industries but also erodes the underlying skills that are being

developed by these course profiles. There exists here a particular risk, through the unmanaged reduction of provision, to critical thinking, analytic and soft skills that are developed by arts and humanities degrees.

While the dire situation facing the sector will likely mean higher education continues to shrink in the short to medium term, it is our contention that university leaders are now naively rushing towards "specialisation" without fully understanding the needs of the region they are there to serve. It is our view that university managers must refuse to take the basic option of blithely hacking off parts of their institution in the naive hope that they will be rewarded by the OfS or the Secretary of State for being "financially prudent," and instead recognise that the institutions they are custodians of are regional assets uniquely placed to drive ambition and attainment, add to our cultural and civic life, and deliver regional economic growth. Administering decline is no longer an option. Cutting subject areas institution by institution, through crisis driven decisions taken behind closed doors, represents a betrayal of the public service and civic missions our universities were built on.

## POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Our proposal of a **Minimum Provision Guarantee** transcends individual institutions and management structures to ensure that the East of England retains access to a defined core of subjects regionally. This is a sensible, pragmatic, joined up alternative model to ensure that the East of England does not become a "cold spot" for specific subject areas.

**This mechanism has two elements.**

**First, a national reformed body** that will be responsible for monitoring regional subject provision across England with the aim of protecting subjects that are seemingly at risk in specific regions. This entity could be within the OfS, a revived form of HEFCE, or a new body along the lines the British Academy and Education Committee have proposed.<sup>7</sup> This proposal builds on infrastructure that already exists and would be easily deliverable at low cost.

Second, we are proposing a Regional Higher Education Compact for the East of England. Spanning Norfolk, Suffolk, Cambridgeshire and Essex, this body would bring together the region's universities, colleges, combined and county authorities, NHS partners, and civic and business representatives. Its role would be to give the region

a voice in how higher education provision is delivered locally and to ensure that institutions are actively speaking to one another on issues relating to the research and teaching they do, while also ensuring the sector is accountable to the communities they are meant to serve. This compact would not override the autonomy of individual institutions but would provide a forum through which strategic conversations relating to regional provision could take place openly and transparently.

This proposal seeks to ensure a clear baseline in terms of provision and access so that entire subjects don't disappear from our region. Where cuts are unavoidable, this body can be used to secure regional provision - for example, through a shared provision arrangement between two universities, a managed transition to another provider, or a planned succession where a subject moves rather than closes. This would, of course, need financing. As such, we are proposing a modest budget line that could be delivered through a re-allocation of OfS and Research England funds. We are also calling for the government to restore some funds and reverse cuts (to areas such as the Strategic Priorities Grant) and to reallocate this money to ensure at-risk subjects are protected at a regional level.

Some will object to this proposal on the basis that UK universities are 'independent entities' and should exist within a 'market driven system'. Yet we all know that UK higher education currently functions as a quasi-market that is underwritten by the state. This, therefore, is a choice between intervention that is incoherent, reactive and crisis driven, and intervention that is planned, transparent and delivers for prospective students, institutions and our region more broadly.

These proposals would not override institutions governance or direct academic content at a granular level, but would go a long way in ensuring a genuinely multidisciplinary HE offer in the East of England at time when the financial precarity of our sector means that individual institutions are poorly placed to deliver this on their own terms.

## WHAT WE ARE ASKING OUR MPS

We are asking our elected officials to consider and advocate for the following five proposals:

1. **To extend the remit of the Office for Students to include the issue of regional subject provision.** This could be achievable through secondary legislation and

would mean this (or a similar body) would monitor regional provision across England and to publish an annual report identifying emerging cold spots.

- 2. Establish a premium for at-risk subject areas.** Establish a clear funding stream that would be used to protect subjects identified as at risk in specific areas. Funding levels to be determined but should be weighed against the economic value that universities bring to a region.
- 3. Reverse specific policy decisions that undermine the sector's ability to sustain provision across our region.** Politicians should advocate for the restoration of nursing to the higher-subsidy tier of the Strategic Priorities Grant and should be vocally opposing the introduction of the proposed International Student Levy. Government should also review the impact of the National Insurance rise on higher education funding.
- 4. Support a Regional Higher Education Compact for the East of England.** A body spanning Norfolk, Suffolk, Cambridgeshire and Essex, that brings together the region's universities, colleges, combined and county authorities, NHS partners, and civic and business representatives. This compact would offer a regional perspective and voice on how higher education is mapped and delivered, as well as brokering coordination between institutions.
- 5. Legislate for a region Minimum Provision Guarantee.** That would establish a statutory floor for regional subject provision in England, with a national monitoring function that identifies risks and to intervenes to ensure provision is not lost in its entirety.

## References/Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> University of East London, *Advancing Institutional Maturity in Growth, Economies of Scale, Productivity and Efficiency: Part 2, Further Analysis and Case Studies* (London: University of East London, in collaboration with Barclays and Shakespeare Martineau, July 2026).

<sup>2</sup> British Academy, *Cold Spots: Mapping Inequality in SHAPE Provision in UK Higher Education* (London: The British Academy, 2025); House of Commons Education Committee, *Higher Education and Funding: Threat of Insolvency and International Students* (London: House of Commons, 2026).

<sup>3</sup> Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI), *Maintenance Loan Now Covers Just Half of Students' Costs* (Oxford: HEPI, 2025); Centre for Research in Social Policy (Loughborough University), *Minimum Income Standard: Analysis of Student Maintenance Loan Coverage* (Loughborough: Loughborough University, 2025); Hetan Shah, "We Need Humanities More Than Ever in the Age of AI," *Financial Times*, 16 July 2026.

<sup>4</sup> Universities UK, *Impact of Universities: In Numbers* (London: Universities UK, 2023); London Economics, *The Impact of the Higher Education Sector on the UK Economy*, report for Universities UK (London: London Economics, 2023).

<sup>5</sup> Universities UK, *Generating Growth and Opportunity in the East of England* (London: Universities UK, July 2024).

<sup>6</sup> Universities UK, *Generating Growth and Opportunity in the East of England* (London: Universities UK, July 2024).

<sup>7</sup> HESA, *Graduate Outcomes 2020–21*, cited in House of Lords Library, *Higher Education: Contribution to the Economy and Levelling Up*, briefing for the debate on Lord Blunkett's motion, 7 March (London: House of Lords Library, 2024).

## About UCU Briefs

UCU members are at the heart of the campaign for a different future for higher education.

Over the coming months, we will publish more briefs that explore in depth the topics outlined above and continue to push our vision. Higher education belongs to all of us and we all have an interest in making it sustainable and accountable into the future.

To do that, we need more of you. If you work in higher education and are not yet a member, join UCU [www.ucu.org.uk/join](http://www.ucu.org.uk/join) and help shape the future of UK universities.

We also welcome interest from members in contributing to our briefs series.

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