

5 Barriers Undermining

UNIVERSITY PERFORMANCE

in the United Kingdom

External pressures on universities are intensifying, driven by financial strain, changing student expectations, rapid technological shifts, and increased public scrutiny. But resilience depends less on these pressures themselves and more on whether internal structures and strategies are ready to respond.

This infographic highlights five barriers that amplify external risks, the consequences they create, and key questions leaders should ask to test their readiness.

1 Unclear Decision Ownership **Undermines Responsiveness**

External Pressure: Policy shifts, financial constraints, and rising student expectations require faster, more coordinated decision-making than universities are accustomed to.

Internal Barrier: Fragmented structures and unclear accountability make coordinated decisions slow and contested.

Why It Matters: When responsibilities are dispersed and accountability is unclear, even high-priority initiatives struggle to move forward or scale effectively.



What to Consider

- Where is ownership for change ambiguous or contested?
- Which silos limit cross-functional coordination?
- Do we have mechanisms to test reforms before scaling?

2 Outdated Programme Portfolios **Limit Revenue Opportunities**

External Pressure: As learners become more outcome-oriented, universities face a growing imperative to align programmes with market value—not just tradition or institutional identity.

Internal Barrier: Institutions often lack the market insight, financial levers, or cultural incentives to adapt offerings quickly or strategically.

Why It Matters: Overreliance on traditional degrees, especially in saturated or declining disciplines, leaves institutions vulnerable to enrolment shocks and unable to capture growth in emerging segments.



What to Consider

- Are we using real-time learner and labour market data to shape programme decisions?
- Do our current offerings clearly differentiate us in an increasingly crowded and outcomes-focused market?
- Are we actively testing and scaling new formats, such as microcredentials, hybrid delivery, or stackable learning?

3 Fragmented AI Activity **Undermines Strategic Progress**

External Pressure: With generative AI shaping industries and skill demands, institutions must decide how to integrate AI into academic, operational, and governance models.

Internal Barrier: Dispersed experimentation, limited governance, and unclear leadership prevent universities from developing a cohesive AI approach.

Why It Matters: Without an institutional AI strategy, universities risk falling behind on student expectations, missing out on efficiency gains, and mismanaging reputational and ethical risks.



What to Consider

- Are we preparing students and staff for an AI-enabled workforce?
- Do we have governance frameworks for responsible and effective AI use?
- How are we leveraging AI to improve student experience and institutional capacity?

4 Ineffective Estates Strategy **Impedes Financial and Academic Flexibility**

External Pressure: Estates decisions are no longer just about capacity; they're a test of how capital is deployed and whether their physical footprint aligns with evolving needs.

Internal Barrier: Legacy estates plans and siloed decision-making tie up resources in underused assets and limit the institution's ability to adapt quickly.

Why It Matters: Underutilised space and deferred maintenance drain budgets, reduce agility, and limit the strategic choices available to academic and financial leaders.



What to Consider

- Are we maximising the use of existing space before committing to new investments?
- Is our estates strategy aligned with academic priorities and long-term mission?
- Who owns decisions around space planning, and do they have the right incentives?

5 Rigid Recruitment Strategies **Expose Institutions to Risk**

External Pressure: Demographic decline and global competition are reshaping the recruitment landscape, forcing institutions to reconsider how and where they compete for students.

Internal Barrier: Static strategies and overreliance on vulnerable pipelines leave institutions ill-prepared to respond to volatility or shift direction.

Why It Matters: Dependence on narrow source markets heightens risk and limits institutions' ability to align student intake with academic, financial, and operational priorities.



What to Consider

- How are we evolving recruitment strategies to reflect shifting domestic and international dynamics?
- Are we overdependent on a small number of international markets or recruitment partners?
- Is our recruitment plan integrated with academic strengths, infrastructure capacity, and financial goals?

While these barriers are already shaping daily realities on campus, they can also serve as catalysts for transformation. Leaders who take them on directly will emerge stronger, more agile, and **better equipped for what lies ahead.**



Looking for solutions?

Access our companion resource centre for practical strategies and tools to help address each of these challenges.