The Office for Students' latest report also makes clear that there is a strong possibility for international students to be left out, with restrictions on their ability to contribute to the local economy. This does not just impact on the international students themselves – it also impacts on our research for the economy and our public good.

So, for now, we are on our own and have to build our strategy, driven by our passion for excellence, by the opportunity and social mobility that underpins higher education. Universities are increasingly anchors of innovation and growth in the UK – we must play our part in driving regional economic development.

We need to build new and efficient relationships with organisations in the public and private sector, to harness the value of research for the economy and public services.

And we need to engage creatively with the government – local, regional and national – in order to secure the funding and support that will enable universities to thrive.
Vice Chancellor in plea to rethink university funding

THE Vice Chancellor of one of Yorkshire’s leading universities has called for a rethink amid a crisis in higher education funding.

Charlie Jeffery, from the University of York, told The Yorkshire Post: “The cost of teaching and research is nowhere near covered by its income, especially for a Russell Group university.”

His comments come as more and more of the region’s higher education providers warn of funding difficulties, driven by falling government grants and a freeze in fees for UK students.

Last month risk of redundancy notices were issued to more than 120 staff at Sheffield Hallam University, while last summer more than 90 were placed at risk at Huddersfield University due to restructuring.

It comes as a quarter of modern universities – created after 1992 – across the country are looking to lose roles, a survey of the University College Union found this year.

Professor Jeffery said inflation has driven up the cost of operating universities, adding to pressures on already-stretched finances.

“The only thing that has been holding the system together are cross-subsidies that balance the funding shortfalls. And the biggest source of cross-subsidy are the higher fees paid by international students,” he told The Yorkshire Post.

“UK higher education has a brilliant reputation worldwide, which means we can attract some of the brightest talent worldwide to study here in the UK. But we are now in a situation in which it is only because of the international student fee income that we can afford to teach home students.”

That stark fact, he said, is compounded by fears that the Government is clamping down on international student figures, with more restrictions on student visas.

He added: “There is no other way of saying it: the UK higher education system is in crisis. The way it is funded just doesn’t work any more. A rough guess is that about half of the sector is responding by cutting jobs and courses.”

Prof Jeffery said only about 10 per cent of the sector has the financial capacity to sail through more or less unaffected. But he said even if a future government is more supportive of recruiting international students, there is concern about whether it is in the UK’s best interests for its universities to be so dependent on international student flows.

“It also makes us vulnerable to geopolitical turbulence. Some universities now see over 80 per cent of their student fee income coming from international students. This does not seem like a sensible or sustainable basis for funding the sector,” he added.

However, last month the Science Secretary, Michelle Donelan, dismissed concerns that the university sector is facing a funding crisis when she appeared before the House of Lords Science and Technology Committee, adding that her department was working alongside the Department for Education on the issue.

“Do we think it’s a crisis? No, we do not,” Ms Donelan said. “Are we working closely with the Department for Education to make sure that we’re across the financial health of the universities that are leading on research and that we are making sure that our policies are delivering? Absolutely.”

Connie Daley
NEWS CORRESPONDENT
Vice chancellors do not declare crises lightly

Make no mistake, when the Vice-Chancellor of a world-renowned Russell Group university goes on record to warn that the country's higher education sector faces an existential crisis, the stakes for learning could not be higher.

Historically, the world has relied on the work of the United Kingdom's universities, the discoveries made through their intensive research earning the country the reputation as a science superpower – the laboratory to the world.

Innovations that have been developed on the back of discoveries made within the four walls of UK universities have changed the course of history, from medicine to mechanics. Now, says Professor Charlie Jeffery, exclusively in this newspaper today, all of that is in peril.

Offering Government a pathway out of this crisis, Professor Jeffery has today outlined a comprehensive ten-point plan that will, if implemented swiftly, lead the higher education sector out of ruinous collapse. He begins by calling for ministerial and departmental leadership at Government level, underscoring the dire need for a single Government department, dedicated to further and higher education: one that can monitor, map and manage the myriad funding flows, offering financial rigour to teaching and learning establishments with modelling that provides long-term financial security.

He is joined, too, by the Vice-Chancellor of Bradford University, Shirley Congdon, who states the need for a task force to be set up immediately. One charged with analysing and articulating the challenge ahead of the formulation of dedicated ministerial oversight so that solutions are ready and waiting for deployment as soon as is practicable.

For if the interventions called for today in this newspaper do not materialise, the damage done to the reputation of our nation will be incalculable.