

Teaching and Learning Oral Evidence Session

Part One: Transitions to Learning

- Rae Tooth – CEO Villiers Park and Co-Chair of the Fair Access Coalition
- Dr Paul Redmond – Director of Student Experience and Enhancement, University of Liverpool
- Professor Sue Rigby – Vice Chancellor, Bath Spa University
- Professor David Phoenix – Vice Chancellor, London South Bank University

Mary Curnock Cook

The Student Futures Commission has got a very wide ranging brief; what do students want and need to ensure that they can be successful at university post pandemic. The purpose of this session is therefore really twofold. Partly to hear your answers and ideas and any solutions you want to put forward. But also to flag up areas where our inquiry needs to dig a bit deeper. I'm going to start off with a question that I'll put to, to all four of you, which is to invite you to say something about starting with

Professor David Phoenix, based on everything you've experienced in the last year and what you've seen going on in the sector and how all the elements of how universities have been working, that you'd want to see continue in September and into the future.

Professor David Phoenix

The two things that jumped out to me are the way in which the sector has shown it can respond in terms of the development of blended learning. We've had to use a hybrid system because of the speed of reaction, but actually the continued development of that to create a properly blended approach, I think would be something I would want to keep. Because we've had numerous feedback from students with special needs and other groups as to the benefits of that approach. And the awareness, it's shown on inequalities across different groups, and the need to be aware of those inequalities in terms of the wider health and wellbeing support is an area of debate online to keep going.

Mary Curnock Cook

Rae Tooth, what elements have you seen in how universities have been working that you might want to see continue.



Rae Tooth

In terms of the feedback we get from our young people, I think it's the human nature of the interaction that they've had with universities. And that feels like it's been a real step change because of the pace of change in terms of systems and processes and ways of working, universities had to step into and did really very well. They increased the number of human interactions with a diverse range of students and so the students that we speak to feel like they have much stronger relationships with their institutions. They've not always been happy about everything along the way, but they certainly feel like they're talking to human beings who are genuinely invested and care about the right outcomes for them.

Mary Curnock Cook

That's interesting. So, you think that because of the pandemic, universities have stepped up the level of one-to-one interaction with some of the students that you serve.

Rae Tooth

Yes, that's right. Certainly, around the challenges about exams last summer and clearing and young people having to navigate the complexities as young people and make really complex decisions in very short spaces of time. What they said was that there was huge amounts of empathy from the staff that were talking to them and there was a real drive and willingness for staff, regardless of the institution that they were at to help young people find the best place that they could in the circumstances. Like I said, they didn't always get the place that they would have wanted, or the place that they felt that they deserved and I have some understanding of that. But they certainly felt like everybody was trying to find the best solution in those really very trying situations. And then that really boosted the sense of a sector that cares about outcomes for those young people.

Mary Curnock Cook

That's fantastic. I suspect it has some implications for workload for people, but I certainly felt that the step up in the sector in the summer last year too. Paul, what about you? What would you like to see carry on?

Dr Paul Redmond

I think in some respects, the pandemic turbocharged the future, it gave us a glimpse of some of the changes that we thought would come down the line in the next few years, but it's also brought it very much sooner than we thought. So, in some of our support services, the areas that I manage, we've been able to bring forward lots of changes that we talked about in the past, but have now actually been able to do. Our counseling and wellbeing services are now much more accessible to students online. Our careers employability team have made great strides with employers in terms of virtual internships and there's been a whole range of changes that we've been able to accelerate, which we'll keep hold off from now on. The hybrid approach is something that we're certainly keen to keep.

Mary Curnock Cook

And you're not worried that colleagues will heave a huge sigh of relief and go back to doing things how they were always done before. I think it's going to be quite hard, isn't it for some universities to hold on to these things when the pressure to do it differently has changed?

Dr Paul Redmond

I think colleagues have surprised themselves at how innovative we can be so quickly. And certainly, student demand has shown that it allows us to reach students that perhaps we wouldn't have reached in the past.

Mary Curnock Cook

Fantastic, Sue, what about you?

Professor Sue Rigby

To start with a bit of context, my university has about 8500 students in the southwest of England and about 70% of our students have at least one marker of social deprivation. We don't quite teach a comprehensive curriculum, but we focus a little bit more on the arts and humanities, and we teach right through, particularly through teacher training, health and allied care, and so on, so most of our students are young around 18 or 19 on entry. To answer your question, what I've seen in universities that I think is really impressive is that we've actually spent money to tackle issues of inequality, I've been able to go to my governors and say, we have to provide a laptop and internet access for every student. And the governors have agreed to that, that would have taken me years to get through any process in the past. And we did it almost instantly. So, I think what I'd like to see is university leaders continuing to focus on social injustice, and not forgetting that those students are still if not more deprived after this than they were at the beginning. And the other thing that I think we've really taken away from the pandemic, is that we need to listen to students, not in some abstract way, I really liked the Wonkhe survey that was done. But I've been meeting with groups of students in dropping sessions weekly since the pandemic started, and just hearing their stories has been a revelation, but also hearing how angry how frustrated and how really near panic they've been at times in the past, I think is really important to capture, and not kind of smooth over just because we managed endpoint assessments and graduation. So continuing to listen to our students and their authentic voices I think is critical.

Mary Curnock Cook

Well, I think there's a lot of students who would say three cheers to that. Thank you, Sue. And now I'm going to hand over to Mary Stuart.

Professor Mary Stuart

I'm going to kick off with a question for Rae and then if we have time, I'll invite others to comment. My question is really about transition. As you know the students who are going to be joining universities in September, have had a pretty rough sixth form or college experience. And some of the things that they would in the past have experienced, like being able to do revision and then test themselves within an examination environment they just

won't have experienced. Thinking about the different kinds of students that will be going to university I wonder how prepared you think they're going to be for what they're going to experience at university? And what advice would you give universities for what they need to do to help those students succeed?

Rae Tooth

Thanks, Mary. That's a really great question and really important that we start thinking about that transition. I was contemplating that this morning, actually. It seems to me that there are some practical things that have been missing for young people over the last two years. Particularly, that's around the development of study skills when you're studying in blended learning delivery models. So not just thinking through that have I covered the course content that I would normally have expected to cover if I was doing level three education, but also as we move to that blended approach, and as we've heard already, there's an appetite to continue with some level of blended learning, to start to develop those, those very particular study techniques around blended learning, which requires higher levels of motivation, because you have less interaction with another person in that face to face classroom way. And I think we've already touched on the very desperate need for some of those young people to have good quality access to technology that allows them to do that learning. So some of those young people haven't been accessing good quality tech. And so they need to do some upskilling in that area. I was also thinking about the richness of what those people do bring. And I think that while we might not have chosen to give these experiences to young people to only see them as coming with a deficit, perhaps it does them a disservice, because those young people have also managed to survive a pandemic and support their families during that process. And for many of them, that means a significant increase in their family responsibilities. And they come to university really very capable in some areas of their life, in terms of how they will manage their budgets, how they run their households, that they are capable of juggling many competing priorities. Frankly, if you've managed to hold down jobs in supermarkets to help support their family to pay rent, or buy food for themselves while studying for their A Levels remotely on poor quality tech and gone onto get the grades that they need to get into higher education, we should do nothing but applaud them, and then do the things that we need to do to make sure that they are absolutely given the opportunity that they deserve to thrive at this point.

Professor Mary Stuart

Thank you, I thought that was really wonderful, because we're trying not to focus very much on a deficit model, but actually, what students bring. Dave being in London, you have a high number of black and minority ethnic students. So I wonder if you had any particular nunnace you wanted to add to to raise really important comments.

Professor David Phoenix

Thank you, Mary. And I think you're right about the diversity. And because within the group, we've also got colleges and academies we've seen it from a number of perspectives. So for example, a lot of our adult learners are coming through non standard entry routes and college study. But we weren't allowed to take the adult learners back into college at the same time as the younger learners. So they've been further disadvantaged in many ways because of their age and of course, there's differences in socioeconomic backgrounds. There are two

things that we've sought to do to try and address this. I think the first is to run sessions over summer for year 13 students both those at our academy and all new starters, and separate sessions for some of the older starters. And those have been developed not just to look at supporting them in gaining additional knowledge that they missed or missed out on, but practical skills, and just as importantly, the social skills, because that's been an area that's been missed because of the isolation. The second thing that we found quite helpful, we piloted a pre-entry self assessment that was developed through our education division, in collaboration with academics, at students, professional services, and people within the schools, to get people to think through at an individual level, what support they thought they might need, so we can try and tailor the response. Because there's a danger, we speak in generic terms. And actually, it's about individuals. And those individuals have had very, very different experiences, from what we're saying.

Smita Jamdar

My question relates to the polling that was carried out in advance of this Commission, which suggested that 63% of current university students believe they're below where they need to be academically. I'd be very interested to hear from Paul Redmond, please, if possible about, first of all, whether you know that that's right. But also even if it isn't, right, there clearly is a perception issue here about confidence. So how should universities help students regain their confidence if they do feel that they've missed out?

Dr Paul Redmond

The university's welcome group is looking at what we're going to do to induct students, and we're looking at both onboarding and back onboarding for this cohort. And what we see as crucial is this period over the summer, both for our new students, prospective students, and our returning students. What we're offering is a whole suite of support for them that they'll be able to access starting at the end of this month. We're putting together a series of modules to help students both get back into the swing of study, but also to cover certain things that we know that they need in order to be successful learners. So we have a success strategy at Liverpool that we've just launched. And it has three dimensions, academic success, personal success and future success. So we're rolling that out to our students. But we do see this summer period, as absolutely critical to get to get them back up to speed but also to get them to build up their confidence and their networking and get ready for coming back to university. So it's not just starting with welcome week it's a pre welcome. In fact, before welcome week, we're having an orientation week for certain groups of students like commuter students, mature students, disabled students, that we are bringing onto campus a week early to reorientate themselves.

Smita Jamdar

Given all the things that we know in a normal year students struggle with transition, do you think this idea of a package of modules over a summer in advance of the Welcome Week is something that could be used more generally, not just in response to the pandemic,

Dr Paul Redmond

Last year, when we were trying to cope with the impact of the pandemic, we introduced something called Foundation Week, for the first time. It was a week dedicated for all students to get them up to speed with IT skills, learning online, and so on. It was incredibly popular with students. So I think we underestimated because we think that they're digitally advanced. We underestimated how confused students are with online skills. Even though they use phones all the time, they really felt they needed additional help with IT skills. So don't underestimate this is the message I found.

Professor Becky Francis

Professor Sue Rigby, we've already heard a little bit about disadvantage and learning loss. And so I'm wondering what resources do universities need to adequately tackle this issue in learning loss and gaps in knowledge and of course experience both for new and returning students.

Professor Sue Rigby

That's a really challenging question. I think I'd want to stand back a bit and frame this by saying, well no one knows yet. And it's when you look at what universities are doing to look at remediating learning gaps or skills gaps, or confidence gaps, as we come into study next year, it's all fantastic. But it's predicated on the assumption that most of these students are just a wee bit behind. And a small amount of support for a small amount of time is sufficient. But actually that's just a guess, as at the moment, we don't know. My sense from talking to a lot of students is that their learning loss in terms of content is insignificant. I mean, what's the content of a degree you can choose what it should be, and for all, except a, very small number of PSRB regulated degrees, if people graduate having read one less book, or looked at fewer slides who cares, as long as they reach the technical and academic competencies that they need. But to imagine that we can address 14 months of constrained learning in a week at the beginning of the semester, it shows a very high degree of optimism in the efficacy of universities that I'm not sure I share. And I think really, what we're going to need is three years of patience, so that students coming into study in first year this year, might legitimately be expected to reach the outcomes they would have done anyway, as they graduate. And I think if we anticipate any less than disruption of study, we're going to let down any student who hasn't thrived during the pandemic. And the other piece of this and I know it's oblique as an answer, and not a direct one is that we expect the disparity between students who thrive and students who don't to be much greater than ever before. If our job is to bring all of those into a degree of congruence or a cluster close enough together to learn as a group, that's where we need to focus our effort. And the broad truth at the moment is that we've got lots of people with good ideas, individually, universities, Universities UK, what students think, what staff in schools think but we haven't done the work to actually illuminate this sufficiently to plan for it. And so at the moment, I think probably our plans are a bit cursory. And what we need is a really quick, deep assessment of what learning loss looks like beyond the subject discipline where I would posit it's largely irrelevant.

Professor Becky Francis

Thanks very much, that's really helpful. And the complexity is eye watering, isn't it. But I'm wondering if you can say any more about the sort of planning steps that will be taken. For example, if subject level gaps in knowledge become evident for individual students on their arrival, presumably, we wouldn't want to see that have a detrimental impact, and particularly an unresolved one. Is thinking going on in this regard?

Professor Sue Rigby

Yes, across the piece. So there are certainly ameliorations that all universities have access to. The first year rarely counts towards a degree, so what we can do is take time to identify learning gaps. I think it would be worrying if the first encounter that students had with universities was a process of working out what they don't know, I can't think of a better way to crash their their innovation and skills and confidence. But obviously, we're thinking about developing a more agile quality assurance process, so that we can change the course while it's running if we need to, if the cohort demands that. Above the bar, we're putting in a revised and really souped up personal tutor system so that every student has an individual academic train to help them, mentor them and guide them. And actually, our professional services staff have offered to be part of that as well. So all students will have a mentor from professional services. I think there are lots of good stories because no university is sitting on its hands around this. But there is also the risk that the needs that these students have, particularly kids that have been sitting in their bedroom for 14 months instead of going out and growing up about to enter university, I'm not sure what we can do in the short term to help them it's a longer process of engaging them socially, engaging their confidence and engaging their capacity to learn. And I think we need patience to do that. And the real tool that all universities need to be empowered with is that of patience, and that's a very difficult commodity to grow when there's an issue and the need for quick solutions.

Mark Blythe

Professor David Phoenix, building on this fantastic discussion we've been having thus far and actually also, as a parent of a son, who's halfway through his university degree, we're interested in what provision you are making to help returning students from their first year to second year and from their second year to third year, who are coming back to a university that will hopefully be much more in person. What provision are you making for those students, and perhaps even more nuanced, there is a whole group of students who know nothing, they don't know what it was like to have a university career in person. And they will be socially mixing with students who had the good fortune of being at university before COVID struck who did experience that and have got those networks of friendship. So we need to explore what if anything can be done for that.

Professor David Phoenix

It follows on from the previous discussion, and I agree with a number of the previous comments about, there not being a quick fix. But I do think we can overanalyze this and have a rabbit in the headlights type approach. So certainly, I think the approach we're taking, and I'm hearing other institutions doing similar is support. We're putting on a range of opportunities over summer for current students to come and attend university. And we're

giving them the opportunity to do additional lab work, seminar, group work, etc. And there's two drivers behind that. One is to give them the opportunity to further extend the breadth of material they've covered if they wish. But actually, the way we tried to design those exercises, it's more about getting them back to working in groups and to the social dimension and the peer to peer interaction, and the opportunity to debate and work within teams in person rather than virtual.

So we're putting on a range of these enrichment activities that will have an academic focus. But actually, the primary aim is not additional knowledge, because they've already got through last year it is about those social engagements. The other area we're looking at is that we're in a fortunate position that we've been working for a number of years on a new digital platform and customer relationship management system. And the phase of rollout at the moment is the health and well being phase. So the aim of that is that it makes sure that each student has an individual account that enables them to at this stage to access non academic support. And it's about the health and wellbeing side so that some of it they can get instantly through online chat functions or through frequently asked questions to self triage. And that allows us to then focus on the more complex needs through the one to one interactions and the specialist staff who work on site. So we're currently doing quite a bit of retraining and support of colleagues to work with that system and provide individualized support. And I think the third point, and I am going to push back a little bit on some of the points earlier I think, you know, if we simply go in and say to people, you know, what is it you don't know, or do you know that x y and z is probably pretty much a waste of effort. But I do think there is a need to speak to people as individuals and get them to engage and to work through where they think their concerns are. Because if you don't know where they think their concerns are, you haven't got a tool to have a dialogue with them, you're back to generic responses. And I don't think that's where we need to be.

Dr Omar Khan

We all know that there's been obviously challenges with online learning and teaching generally, but there's a specific concern around disadvantaged students that we've already heard expressed. My questions is for Rae Tooth, but obviously, if there's time, others can respond,. We know that disadvantaged students are more likely to have struggled to access digital learning over the past two years and that there's already existing inequality gaps, and those may have likely to have widened. So Rae, what additional support should be offered to ensure that more disadvantaged students are able to engage in university study at the same level as their more advantaged peers.

Rae Tooth

I think there are two parts of this. The first is a recognition that everything we're asking those disadvantaged students to do takes some more of their time. And disproportionate number of disadvantaged students also engaged in part time work to support their living costs. And so if what we're saying is that we want them to spend more time and work over the summer to make sure that they are filling those gaps or readying themselves for further study, we need to think about the immediate economic impact that that will have on them. And that may mean that they will have a greater need to draw down on hardship comes from universities. So I just wanted to kind of precurse anything else with that health warning. We

can provide opportunities, but we need to make sure we're removing barriers to accessing those opportunities. And some of those are financial and very immediate. And in terms of specifically the digital divide, what I've seen from the young people that we work with at Villiers Park is that there continues to be a desperate need for some of the hardware that young people need. And given that they haven't had access to hardware at home, they've only used technology at school, they aren't as effective as you might expect them to be in terms of self led online learning. We did some really interesting work with the University of Bath where we send out laptops, to disadvantaged families, and after a week, they hadn't taken them out of the box, because they didn't really know what to do with them. They didn't know how to engage with that technology. And that's not to be dismissive of those people. It's just if you're given something that you don't know how to use, because you've never used it before, then you need that support to build up your levels of engagement. So I think there's some really practical things that we need to do about not the content of digital learning, but how do you how do you do it? Just like the first time I got my smartphone out of the box, and you look at it and it's pretty, but I don't know what I'm meant to do with it. So I think there's some really practical stuff that we need to do around developing tech skills with young people. And I think part of that is also about developing understanding about what digital spaces look like. So we have assumptions about engaging in social media. And we have assumptions about how people use critical thinking when they're engaging with information online. If you don't have experience of that, and you don't have a number of years of building that experience, you haven't developed those things yet. So there is an increased need and support in how you engage with other people on online platforms, and how you engage your critical thinking in terms of the material that you're presented with.

Dr Omar Khan

I think the other question that I would like to ask at some point is what kind of data we've actually got on this question, how far universities are collecting data about gaps, widening between disadvantaged and advantaged students due to or because of online learning and whether or not such data are collected across the sector. So we might be able to compare where particular providers are doing as well as particular courses or particular cohorts.

Mary Curnock Cook

Thanks so much, Omar. And thanks, Ray. I think that reminder that the hardware the practical stuff hasn't been hasn't been fixed, let alone all the other things that come after people have got the kit that they need. So so really important point there.

Stephen Isherwood

Paul, we're interested to hear more about how you are monitoring how you're tracking, student engagement and progress over the last 14 months,

Dr Paul Redmond

We've done a number of things. In the first three months of term, I commissioned a 100 day survey. We held a whole series of focus groups, interviews, online discussions with students to gauge their feelings and their progress. We followed that up with a series of pulse surveys that we've carried out with students. And just recently I've commissioned another one of our

students, because I realize there's always a danger with surveys like this you commission that you speak to the engaged students, and you don't get the, the unengaged ones who don't involve themselves. So I actually got one of our students who's a complete whiz on Instagram to engage with hundreds of students that we would, I think, traditionally struggle to engage with, by using a different tone of voice, a different platform and that's really enabled us to measure the how they feel and what they what their concerns are as well as what's going well. It's enabled us during the year to respond and to change tracking in different ways. So the number one thing that they've told us that they really are concerned about is the lack of opportunities to make friends. That's the number one concern that students have got, which might sound trivial, but you know, not having friends means you don't feel you belong, it means that you then feel that everyone else has got friends, except me. And then we've noticed that people then start having these self limiting ideas, they start thinking, I don't really belong here, I'm not clever enough and suddenly, there's a whole spiral. So we really are working harder now to help students make friends with each other in different ways, because of the dangers, but we wouldn't have been able to do this if we weren't monitoring their experiences on an ongoing basis.

Stephen Isherwood

And, Paul, I'm just interested to know as well about the various groups that we're finding are affected by this. Has that sort of data analysis, the friends piece if there's anything else that actually works well? Was there anything surprising that you wouldn't have expected? Or did it reinforce, some of the the things we would think about the groups that are suffering most most through this pandemic,

Dr Paul Redmond

I think it's across the board, particularly our local students, I think the local students are really feeling isolated from the university. So we've actually put on a summer term program for them which, you know, COVID safely has enabled us to do things on campus. And that's been really popular to get people onto campus. For certain groups, it's really made a massive difference. Some of them said to me that the best thing about it was being able to sit on the grass. And that ability to sit on the grass to feel that you're really here is a massive, massive thing for students. So, you know, in some respects, we've got our strategies, but it's those personal things that make a difference for students. So we're carrying on putting on different workshops, but the main thing is, is listening to them. And asking them, what do they think on a regular basis.

Kate Owen

Professor Sue Rigby, building on this discussion around gaps, I suppose I suppose specifically with regards to curriculum my question would be how are you currently assessing those curriculum gaps for new students? And secondly, what's your understanding and your thoughts around what those curriculum gaps actually are for students as they're as they're coming back onto campus?

Professor Sue Rigby

It's tricky because we haven't got our hands on this year's school students yet so we've got plans to work out what the gaps are, but we won't know what they are until later in the summer. But I think I may be being kind of pedantic about this. I don't think any gaps in information matter. But I think the gaps in how you process that information, and how you learn deeply, are very important. And we've seen a growing gap over the last few years in science A Levels where they don't assess practicals, for example, they became a very poor functional proxy of how well our students would do on a science degree, because they weren't assessing critical elements of skill and learning. So the worries I would have around the degree to which during the preparation for A-levels and Btech's is that students start to develop a kind of synergistic understanding of how they learn and what this learning is like at a higher level. And that they haven't had those moments of clarity, because all of their assessments have been broken up and teacher assessed and so on. And so it will only be the most advantaged students who've been able to have conversation with peers or parents about what learning is and what knowledge is. And my worry is more students will come to university thinking things are true, not not knowing a detail or a piece of information. I think the other thing I worry about is, and I know it sounds daft again, basic literacy and numeracy. Just a facility that means that when you encounter an equation in your first year of chemistry, you are at ease with working it out, you don't panic, when you first have to submit an essay, you're at ease with the syntax and grammar that you need to convey your information. And again, I am worried that over the last year students have actually, on average, worked less, they've been less rigorously, properly assessed in what they were doing, because it's a miracle they were able to submit. And those will be the things that I'm really worried about. And what we're putting in place is an awful lot of learning support, that students can access both online and face to face that can identify those individual deficits. Depending on the subject and the university there may well be vice chancellors who are really worried about people coming in knowing less physics, but I'm not, I'm worried about people knowing how to learn less, and being less adept at bringing through the key parts of their school learning into university study.

Mary Curnock Cook

On your point that gaps in information don't matter, gaps in people's ability and confidence to process is so important. So thank you for crystallizing that thought so clearly.

Professor Juliet Foster

I'd like to change focus a little bit, quite rightly, we're thinking in some detail about student experience and student requirements here. But actually, I'd like to change direction a little bit and think about what staff might need at this point, too. And my question initially is for Professor David Phoenix. So I'd like us to think about what support is currently being given to academic and teaching staff in universities so that they're prepared for the challenges that students might face as they transition into or back into higher education in in the next year, but also what support might be needed, in addition to what's already there and already being provided.

Professor David Phoenix

I think the question you ask is an important one. And I think that we need to recognize fantastic work colleagues have done both in professional services and in academic teams over the last 12 months. But be honest, those innovations have been forced at pace and in turn have created more of a hybrid system. In other words, people have done the very best they can. And there's been some fantastic innovations, but they've been done it at speed and independence. From a larger thinking about the pedagogic construct, moving forward, we don't want to lose that innovation. But we want to give colleagues the time to develop from a hybrid to a blended approach, where the online actually interfaces with the on-site activity to embed the learning. So, the work we're currently doing, certainly, and I think others are is we're trying to appoint an increasing number of learning technologists to provide support and advice in terms of creating online materials in an interactive way. The second thing, what we're currently doing is running a range of teaching sabbaticals, specifically targeted at people who want to lead some thinking within their school about new ways of delivery, because there are differences between some of the creative industries for example, and other areas of the organization. We've also brought in external consultants to trial different learning platforms. So, at the moment, we have a VLE that works well, and students have been loving Microsoft Teams, which is what we've been using. It's one of our main vehicles. But we've also been trialing a number of other commercial platforms and allowing each school to pilot, so we can assess which ones actually felt to be best by staff and by students in terms of the platforms we want to take forward. And the other thing we're trying to do in terms of a long-term approach is we've got a cross group research theme about clinical practice. So, investing in people that want to take some time out to investigate how certain interventions are beneficial or not beneficial to certain groups in reducing awarding gaps. And we're able to do that because of the group structure looking both at the academies and the universities, because within the academies, there's a lot we can learn from how they're using Google Classroom, within the university sector, so we're trying to bring that knowledge in from different educational sectors to help us support that transition to this new approach. There will be some other places that are doing similar. And then over time, there will also be a number of new roles that will be created within the university, both in professional service functions, which will become more blended in terms of academic professional service, and in academic delivery functions, where you need specialists to support some of the technology whilst you want your academics to do the teaching and the research and the enterprise. So I suspect this is part of a shift. And we're at the start of the journey, not the end of it.

Professor Juliet Foster

Thank you so much. One of the things I'm particularly interested in is how staff wellbeing factors into all of this as well, because of experience we've had, everybody has just lived through a pandemic where workloads have been exceptional, where the efforts to deliver teaching have been extreme, where support for students has been very, very difficult. I wonder how much more do you think universities need to do in order to put what you know, you've just described into place in order to be able to allow them to properly support staff wellbeing and to try to address some of the issues of burnout we're seeing among staff as well.

Professor David Phoenix

I think that's a very valid point, and worth some extra focus. I do think in the medium term, we've got to ask questions about the shape and expectation and the counter roles, we need to support these these new developments. The areas of activity which occur, no other institutions are doing we've certainly had a range of workshops and listening sessions to try and bring people together even if it virtually, to share experiences. So they don't feel alone with providing counseling, not just actually for members of staff. But actually they're close dependent because part of the pandemic the impact of the work has been trying to balance the different working arrangements and dealing with the issues of the pandemic, alongside work. And we've also been issuing additional holiday which is a challenge in getting people to take because they feel pressured. But we have tried to emphasize that and we've been developing a range of mental health and dignity in work roles and providing additional training which has been very positively received. So actually it is about workload. But for a lot of interventions that have been most beneficial it has been around support for discussion and conversation and breaking down that feeling of isolation.

Mary Curnock Cook

Thanks, David. I do worry with all the plans that people have to put things in place over the summer, I wonder whether staff will get any summer break at all, plus an extended and difficult admissions?

Professor Lisa Roberts

My question is about teacher assessed grades this summer? Firstly, how much confidence do you have in them, and secondly how you might be thinking of them as a marker for the potential for students to succeed on their courses.

Professor David Phoenix

It's been interesting working with the academies , because it gives you the opportunity to see the work that the schools are doing. I think we've got to recognize there will be variability, more variability than normal between schools. But I've got more confidence in this year's grades than last year's position because the work the colleagues and the academies have been doing, to try and provide an evidence base for that, I think has been very substantial. So I suspect there will be higher grades than in a normal year. I suspect there will be variability. But I think that the work that's been done will make the assessments more robust than last year's.

Rae Tooth

So previously, grades were used as a proxy for knowledge, a set of knowledge and a set of skills to apply that knowledge and then we take that and say, well, that's a proxy for your ability and we can use that to help us judge whether or not you are ready to move forward in your learning this year. This year it's actually quite difficult to do that. Because as we've already discussed, we know that there are going to be gaps in people's knowledge and skills. And it's really difficult to identify where those are. Now, I think not providing any kind of assessment for young people is not really viable. And what I do just keep thinking is that

perhaps the way we need to move forward on this is not so much on the detail of how we do that awarding because it is going to be imperfect, so I don't think we're in a position where we can have a perfect standardized system. But instead, the work that needs to be done is thinking through supporting education establishments, like universities, or for GCSE students, FE and sixth form colleges, but also employers so that when they are reviewing the grades that young people have been awarded last year and this year that they're able to do that in a nuanced way, and to think about what they do with that information and how they use that alongside other information to make effective judgments.

Professor Sue Rigby

Teachers are doing a fantastic job and they know who all their students are. And so what I expect is that we're going to see, let's say a more holistic recognition of the student's perceived value through their grades, which is going to advantage some students and disadvantage others. I think there's also a risk that students will migrate into a kind of education that won't suit them in the long run, because they will consider for example, elevated grades to suggest that they can engage with the kind of learning that will not suit them. And I think the worry for me about grades is whether students trust them to be a marker of their own ability, because by default, we've got rather good at segwaying from a kind of performance at university into a kind of expectation at university and we're jumbling that up a bit at the moment.

Mark Leach

I'm going to bring us back a little bit to this year and the challenges ahead for next few months. What do you think are the biggest challenge on a strategic level? And how should universities and the wider sector be gearing up to tackle them?

Professor Sue Rigby

There are the obvious things we've covered in this discussion today, the two things we haven't covered yet, I think, our worries that I have about student mental health, as people come into study, I think students will be less resilient, less robust and less happy than we would expect them to be. And that can very easily amplify if they don't form peer groups very quickly. And we can't measure that at the moment. And the other thing I worry about actually, is parents. There's a wide, huge range of parenting skills and styles. But if you take a kind of bog standard perception of a student, going to university from a loved home, they've been nurtured to within a millisecond of their existence for the last 14 months, they've never gone out on the raz, they've not been away, they've not caused their parents any anxiety. And suddenly, those students are going to go to university and they will break free because they ought to. And part of the university's strategic role is going to be to manage the anxiety of parents. Equally, there will be students who have been abused at home for the last 14 months, they're going to come to us in a state. But what they're going to do is come to us from an overextended parental experience, rather than the kind of blended peer parent experience that you'd normally expect six formal college to give them. So those are the two things that we haven't discussed already, that I'm really worried about student mental health and parent responses.

Professor David Phoenix

I think from, from my perspective, the concerns are probably a bit broader, in that we're talking about one aspect of the things that university is seeking to address. But we've also got impacts from Brexit and changes to European funding impacting on international recruitment and quite a fluid policy environment. So my concerns actually entering next year, are broader than just this issue, it's around the fact that we've got a lot of very tired staff, but also a great deal still of uncertainty and change that's ahead of us. So we're going into this this period of uncertainty and change from a position where colleagues are going to be tired. And, it is how resilient we're going to be able to be over this next few years.

Mark Leach

In terms of your your cross sectoral roles in Universities,UK, and Million Plus, I'm interested in what the sector can do, collectively, assuming government's not going to come with the guidance and money and resources and things of interest. And a lot of these challenges faced by you are going to be faced by your colleagues across other universities, and in very, very, very similar ways. Is there a greater role for a bit more intersector kind of cooperation? And do you think the sector should be looking to fund that? And what kind of organization could or where should should that set?

Professor David Phoenix

The sector has pretty much funded most of the impact of COVID, although we've had some additional support for hardship. But that's really been money in and out because the students have needed that support directly both for technology in our case with a range of students with problems around child care and other issues. So given that money in and out, all the changes around the technology, the additional staffing, the additional support we are having to put into health and wellbeing, covering the loss of income from halls. All that universities are already covering. And we're already investing to try and support the next phase of development. In terms of coordination. There will always be differences within different institutions based on subject mix, scale, regional area and student mix. But what we have tried to do as a sector and I think you UUK have really stepped up to the mark on this is to provide a range of advice and guidance. And there's been regular updates coming out from UUK in terms of advice and guidance, both in terms of how we deal with COVID and student support, but also other issues at the moment of challenge. I suppose the only additional thing that we could try and do but it's politically more sensitive, is to try and start making statements about how we are going to address September in the absence of any government policy. I think the difficulty there is that you're trying to work collaboratively with government and you don't want to be seen to try to bat government in a position. Because if we end up in a point where we're saying we're all doing this, but then government gives an edict that says you can't, it's not necessarily going to help anybody, and just add further confusion to the sector. In short, certainly most of the institutions I'm talking to we are working, even without the advice at the moment, on the fact that we will be able to return to campus, and that we won't have social distancing. But most institutions are putting in place contingencies. Because we have to, that says, if that's not the case, this is what we will do, which just puts additional burden on us and makes it hard to respond. I think that's just the way it is.

Mary Curnock Cook

Thanks so much, Dave, a solitary reminder that all of this costs money and a feeling that we're left to get on with it and so it's nice to hear that everyone is still working so hard for that. I just do want to thank all my Commissioners for keeping to their time slots, and particularly to Sue, Paul, Dave, and Rae. Gosh, so so much from that session. Just really rich food for thought and a great way to kick off our first evidence session. So thank you all so much for your time. And your really interesting and insightful thoughts and ideas. Can't tell you how much we appreciate it. Thank you so much.