Student Experience and Wellbeing Oral Evidence Session

Part One: Student Support and Wellbeing

- *Dominic Smithies – Student Voice and Equality Lead, Student Minds*
- *Dr Camille Kandiko Howson- Associate Professor of Education, Imperial College London*
- *Mhairi Underwood- Head of Student Voice and Diversity, The Student Room*

Mary Curnock Cook 01:06

The Student Futures Commission has got a very wide ranging brief. Broadly it is about what students want and need to ensure that they can be successful at university post pandemic, whether they're starting or continuing. In this session, we're going to concentrate on student mental health and well being. The session purpose is twofold. Number one is to hear your answers, ideas and solutions, but also for you to flag up for us areas where our inquiry might need to dig a bit deeper. This is about defining issues, as well as hopefully hearing about some solutions. I'm just going to start by asking everybody an overarching question: based on everything you've experienced over the last year or so, things that you've seen going on in the sector? Are there some elements of how higher education has been delivered or managed in the last period that you'd want to see continue in September?

Dr Camille Kandiko-Howson 04:19

Something that has gone much better than anticipated was the delivery of content. Students were able to largely stay on track and meet learning outcomes throughout their course. I think universities shifting online, whilst it wasn't perfect, it was much more successful than it could have been in terms of students being able to maintain the most fundamental core aspect of their experience. That's one thing to keep in mind that has actually gone really well. We don't for example, have a whole year where students need to retake their courses because they just really haven't received any material or learned anything. But what they've really missed out on the last year and a half is the wider student experience. It's really highlighted how important that is for students, both in terms of supporting that core learning, and in terms of the wider skills they develop. So I think that really helps us hone in on what sort of worked well, and what really needs beefing up. And students really missed that collaboration with other students and the social aspects of learning.

Dominic Smithies 05:49

It's hard to say confidently any which way because every approach is going to suit some students and not suit others. While we are hearing some positives and negatives about approaches, it'll be flipped around, whichever different way you do it. So I think what has been valued by students is the exploration of this different mode of delivery, both in terms of teaching but one thing I'm really keen to pick up on is the seemingly improved accessibility support services and how they've adapted to delivering services digitally, remotely for students and for some students who don't kind of want to have to walk into the building or make their way on campus when they're not feeling great feeling like they can just get in

touch immediately, rather than have to make an appointment. Quite a lot of the students have spoken told us about how that has just been a huge pressure lifted. So agree with all of the concerns around academics and teaching and learning but also to think about support services, how they've adapted during the pandemic, there's lots of good practices been done that I'd hate to see lost moving forwards.

Mary Curnock Cook 06:59

That's definitely been something that I'm sure many universities would be reflecting on. And Mhairi you're the voice of the pre student experience for applicants, and for people trying to make choices and decisions. Are there ways in which you think the higher education sector has adapted quickly and that students seem to have enjoyed about the different way of engaging with them before they start?

Mhairi Underwood 07:42

We actually did some research for our navigating changing options report. Most current university students, over 90%, wanted to retain some aspects of what had happened in lockdown. And the opportunity to have more flexible learning was one of those key ones. I think it's really interesting to consider alongside the HEPI report recently, which also spoke about whether students might want to retain some of those blended learning opportunities. What we've seen is that there is a lot of flexibility that students experience and enjoy, and also, there is definitely a desire for that face-to-face teaching to come back as well. We did have some students who spoke a little bit about actually being able to access their learning more effectively from home, if they may have struggled to be on campus, sometimes prior to the pandemic. But they're definitely missing the social aspects.

In relation to students who are applying to University at the moment, we are seeing a lot of students who are due to be starting in September, still saying that there's a lot of information that they still need from university. It was a really small proportion of students who have said that they have everything they need, I think about 10%. There's still a lot to be done in terms of information that new starters will need, and also I don't want to leave out those 2022 applicants. We know that year 12 will often start looking relatively early, especially for those early deadlines. These are the students who never sat GCSE exams, for example, so this might be a cohort that we really need to keep a keen eye on and make sure that we're getting early support to them as well.

Professor Juliet Foster 09:55

I'm going to sort of take it as red, that all of you would say that actually, student mental health and well being does need to be an important priority for universities, it should have been an important priority before the pandemic and maybe we can talk in a few moments about the the impact of the pandemic in particular. But obviously, one of the things we're really interested in as part of this commission is thinking about what universities can do, and can put in place relatively quickly if we're thinking about supporting students over the next academic year. What would you see as being the main priorities for universities, when it comes to student mental health and well being over the coming year?

Dominic Smithies 11:29

I suppose looking holistically, and taking a broad approach to understanding the issue. I think lots of the things that students are needing as already touched upon are a lot of those social opportunities to engage. So making sure that we're providing a lot of what the old traditional approach to the university experience is - because we know that it's so valuable to students in developing relationships, being confident at university, being able to engage in their course and their curriculum through collaborative learning. That's so so key. So making sure students have the opportunity to engage with other students as much as possible. That helps establish a really strong foundation for the informal peer support that we know happens at university when students are able to build really strong networks and friendships with each other.

 In thinking about what the risks are to students going forwards and what needs to be done to support them. I think what has come through so strongly throughout the pandemic past 18 months, is the financial hardship that lots of students have been been facing, particularly exacerbated by the challenges of the job market, falling through gaps with furlough schemes if they're on zero hour contracts, or they're just unable to get jobs because retail and hospitality has been so hard hit. And we know that those are the sectors that students mostly look for when looking for part time jobs to support them while they're studying. And we know the challenges with rent and being told to be in many different places over the last 18 months, it's just exacerbated that challenge. So the financial hardship that students have had to endure, I think there is a role that universities and or government has to play in making sure that that safety net is provided to ensure students have have the funds they need to just have all of the basics covered, from from making sure they have food, a roof over their heads, as well as all the equipment they need to study, the space they need to study effectively. And then we could think of all of the broader stuff that helps us make sure they have as positive an experience as possible. When thinking about mental health and well being, the most immediate risks I'm thinking of are the financial hardship.

There's all of the safety concerns around actually making sure we've got measures in place to stop the pandemic still being a concern and spreading as well so lots of health things to consider. But for me, it's thinking about what main risks are for the students and managing those first. And then just making sure all of our support services are supported and invested in to continue delivering great services to students in an accessible way.

Professor Juliet Foster 14:14

Mhairi, we're going to be seeing students coming to university who haven't just missed out on taking exams normally, but they've missed out on an awful lot of the kind of social life and the sort of the rituals normally associated with that kind of 16 to 18 period. So is there anything in particular you think universities can be putting in place or should be prioritising for those students?

Mhairi Underwood 14:43

It's obviously a massive issue, in terms of the concerns that exist for current students, and also for those students who are starting in September. There's still just a huge amount of uncertainty for those students and we've seen through research and The Student Room community that the majority of them are really concerned, for example, that receiving future assessed grades is gonna hamper their ability to even get into university in the first place. While they might trust the grade that their teacher might give them, what they don't have is any sort of national comparison. So they don't know whether their grading will be fair across the board, they don't have any of this information. Had they done exams, they might feel a little bit more comfortable with the fact that their grade is kind of on a par with other people across the nation. But there's just been so much that has basically impacted that.

I think we're gonna have a group of students coming to university in September, who have spent the majority of their A level studies in extreme uncertainty. I was in a webinar the other day with the ZOE Covid symptom study, and they were talking about how young people have been disproportionately impacted in terms of their mental health or independent life, which I'm sure you all know, because there's tonnes of research which says it. But they said something that really stayed with me about the fact that uncertainty is the pollen for anxiety. And I think that is something that we've really seen for these younger cohorts. It's true for the people who are coming to uni in September, but I think we also need to bear in mind that for current first year students who are going into second year in September, that they haven't had a normal first year experience at all. So in terms of their development as young people, as students, in terms of that university life, which we've talked about already, it may be that they are kind of similar to first years in a lot of ways. They are probably on courses with people they've never met in some cases. And they've been taught by teachers that they've never met. And it might be even more difficult if you kind of have half known people for a year, and then you've got to make friends with them in real life. There's a real kind of tension there that we might need to support young people with in terms of being able to connect with something that Dominic has just spoken about on that social front.

In our Navigating Changing Options research, we saw that less than half of current students felt like they had a support network they could reach out to, less than half knew how to connect with their course mates. And only 34% thought that they could cope with the uncertainties about current students. That's combined with the fact in March of 2020, 50% of students rated their mental health as good or very good. By March of this year, it was 20% of students that rated their mental health good or very good. In happy news it has gone up 10% by June 2021, now sitting at 30% saying good or very good.

But at the same time, we conducted a poll just last week, which said that less than 5% of young people think that it's easy to get early intervention mental health support in their local area. So this isn't specifically the University support services. But 40% of them said that they felt they had to be in crisis in order to receive mental health support. And then you read the comments. And you see that in the comments, people who are in crisis are saying 'I'm in crisis, and I'm not getting the support that I need'. So I think that in terms of support services, if we think about the fact that 95% of students don't feel it easy to get that support, there's a lot of work around access to services or perceptions of access to services to be

done. It may be that there are great services there, but there is a belief that it's not possible, that there are long wait lists, they're not going to get the help they need.

So I think in terms of confidence-building for those new starters, in terms of really kind of helping them to feel settled, helping them to feel like the grades they've got and the position that they have at that university they deserve and they can be successful, and that they can kind of get back on track. I think, also that tailored support for those different year levels and acknowledging that those second years might need that additional kind of first year type support as well. And just really highlighting I think the support that is available for those who are in crisis and for those who aren't yet that early intervention point, I think is really important.

Professor Juliet Foster 19:16

And Camille, when we're talking about student mental health and well being, we can't be treating students as a homogenous group in the first place. But also we know there are particular groups who have been more significantly adversely affected by the pandemic than others. So Camille, I wonder if you have any thoughts on how universities might be able to kind of take some of that forward? Are there are there particular groups that that universities you know, really should be kind of focusing on in thinking about and prioritising mental health and well being?

Dr Camille Kandiko-Howson 19:55

I think Dominic really highlighted the points about needing to capture students who are really struggling with, rent, food, kind of the very basics. And I think that cuts across all sort of demographics, there are these particularly vulnerable students who are really going to struggle to not only engage in higher education, but also to succeed, if some of those points aren't covered for them. So I think that's one thing,. Obviously, student finances is huge. That cuts across for vast swathes of students, and giving students opportunities and building partnerships locally in communities to give students that sense of a bit of a sense of control over those sorts of things and connect to them with jobs. We're hearing quite a different picture about jobs now of you know, lots of openings, lots of opportunities, lots of flexibility as people need positions filled. It's helping students access that; there seems to be a gap there. That sense of not having that financial strain actually can help a lot of these worries.

 One of my key points I want to take away is that students need a sense of control. It highlights what Mhairi mentioned, it's that sense of a lack of certainty, being told this and that, things changing, and students not having much of a sense of ownership over their lives. So it's hard to build that sense of control through things such as building and shaping what a new institutional community will look like. That will be different than what came before; giving students an opportunity to be listened to; and a sense of control about shaping their experience. If students are going to move away from kind of large lectures where the big kind of activity they went to and, you know, interacted with students around that if we're moving away from that, students need to be part of the discussion about what that is replaced with and not feel like they're being told what it is, but that they're part of the discussion, because they do want contact time. It's just going to be something different than what it had been before.

Professor Juliet Foster 22:01

If you have one example of best practice that you think you've seen this year that you would love to see rolled out across other universities, it would be great to hear those.

Dominic Smithies 22:34

I think there's a responsibility to be encouraging institutions to know their own populations. Obviously, every institution's community is going to be diverse in different ways, and very different. So I think for us to say, here's what we see nationally, it can be very different. So I think you do have to know your own populations.   Best practice - it's hard to say across the board, there's different things at different institutions. In terms of supporting students with their learning and teaching, the no detriment policy of last year was a large relief to students and the calls for it to come back this year, that were done in some institutions but not in others. I think there has been a lack of a consistent approach, I had many students sensing a bit of unfairness and injustice in seeing some of their friends from home that went to other institutions having more safety with their assessment than they received which I think was challenging. I'd like to advocate for as much as possible consistent approaches across universities, because students at different institutions do talk to each other and do compare experiences. And that can lead them to feeling unsupported if they see bad support elsewhere. And also financial support that universities have offered. We've seen that done by some with means tested hardship funding, some being less restrictive of what those means are, a universal support package would be in my mind, best practice, and just acknowledging all students have been affected in various ways.

Dr Camille Kandiko-Howson 24:21

The no detriment policy alongside alternative assessments, which a lot of institutions saw really lessen the awarding gaps that they'd noticed before. So those were sort of addressed accidentally, I think, rather than intentionally and I think there's some big takeaways there,. More in the mental health and wellbeing space, one areas where institutions had a lot of success with triaging student concerns. So rather than students being put in a queue to begin with, developing really successful online triaging systems to separate out what is on you know, students in a mental health crisis ,students with developing mental health issues ,and more general wellbeing concerns, and really being able to separate those out and deal with those accordingly and have different patterns for what to address and how to address with students, but not leave students in any of those positions, feeling like they're needing to wait for someone to listen to them. Because sometimes that is enough to deal with that.

Mhairi Underwood 25:28

I have a slightly different perspective, I will just say, from what we have seen in the community, it's communication and consistency in communication. I know a lot of universities have really gone above and beyond. And we see those students talking in the forum. And they feel reassured, they feel like they're in the know. And actually you see them then going and providing advice and reassurance to other students, which is just incredibly powerful. And I really, really hope that that doesn't go away, just because we think the pandemic has gone away. The impact of the pandemic will continue on students and cohorts for years to

come. So that consistency and communication, I think is as imperative now as it was in March last year.

Smita Jamdar 27:05

I think one of the things I just want to sort of have in everyone's mind here is the themes that were emerging from your answers before were the need for flexibility so that you can have solutions that work for the individual rather than kind of a blanket solution for everybody. But also the importance of consistency, so that people feel they're being treated fairly. And the lawyer in me, which is obviously a large part of who I am, is saying those to strike me as slightly difficult and inconsistent. And how do we strike the right balance? It's not impossible, but I think that is going to be the challenge for universities to make sure that they do give that flexibility whilst also maintaining a consistent approach across the board.

So I think actually, my question, my first question, you may well feel you've already answered. The polling that's been done for the Commission has identified that students are feeling lonelier, more isolated over the last 16 months. And I wondered if you had any thoughts, starting, perhaps with Camille on what we could do to support people to re-engage with their peers?

Dr Camille Kandiko-Howson 28:57

I think one big takeaway, and Mhairi sort of hinted on this, is that institutions need to be running a year one and a year two freshers week this year to students, they need a full induction into the university and that opportunity to meet new people. A lot of students don't feel like the connections they made online, with people they never met in person, have much depth, and are kind of the relationships that they feel they need. So I think that's one aspect and then keeping that kind of refreshers idea going. Some institutions sort of run those again in January. And thinking of that you need a double cohort at the beginning of the year and at the midpoint to kind of keep giving students those opportunities. And I think transition spaces between contact time is really important. And I think for students, they have previously relied on this for lectures and that's a lot of what students say they want lectures for, rather than that, they need that material delivered in a large hall with 300 people at once. So it is about facilitating lots of small contact time through various ways. And I think that's what students feel really upset about when they feel like their lectures are being taken away is that it's not being replaced with something else. I think institutions need to get creative about timetabling to figure out how to facilitate those opportunities for students to have some learning contact time, but also that will foster some of those key transition moments where students can find someone to grab a coffee with. And even if that's meeting with, you know, 5 to 10 students, I think students would be happy with that, as you know, as an alternative to a lecture. But that's not how most University estates are set up. But it's not to say universities can't get creative about the spaces that they do have.

Smita Jamdar 30:48

I think even in the working environment, that's the thing that most of us have missed, those sort of accidental contacts where you strike up a conversation, and it's fabulous and interesting, but how do you recreate it when you're not physically bumping into each other?

Mhairi Underwood 31:05

The balance between the flexibility and consistency I think is a difficult one, you're right. To me, the thing that comes to mind is what is the role of peer support? There is structured engagement, that universities can design contact points like we're talking about, and I completely agree with everything just said but I also wonder, is it the party that your parents threw for you? Or is it the party that is happening that your friends organised that is, you know, easy to engage? Because there's not that sort of structured element to it? So are there situations where universities could look at their student base and think about how they might be able to employ metrics of peer connection where there are like ambassadors, but maybe not that structured? Like how can we look at the population of students who might be really motivated, engaged, and happy to set up, you know, those informal points of contact as well, they might be happy to take some more nervous students who are struggling with the adjustment under their wing, they might be able to kind of really help to build that sense of community.

And I think that is something that is going to be a bit of a challenge. There may be some students who are naturally more inclined, there may be students who are naturally a bit more nervous about those contact points, but how can we look at students themselves and figure out. How we talk to students and find out how do you want to look at those sort of peer connections, because the feedback that we hear time and time again is that they really want to connect with each other. That is one of the things that has been missing the most during the pandemic is those connections. So I think it would be really powerful to engage students in that conversation about how we can engage that peer support element in addition to all the structured work the university is doing.

Smita Jamdar 33:08

I was thinking about some of the things that universities used to do pre pandemic that were sort of not linked to the curriculum, things like encouraging student volunteering, and whether that's another opportunity to get students mixing with, you know, larger groups that they don't necessarily just come across in their cohorts. And there's obviously going to be plenty of opportunities for volunteering, post pandemic and a whole host of areas. So that might be a win win. Dominic, what about you?

Dominic Smithies 33:37

It's the first time I've heard of the thought of having a year two freshers week, which I absolutely support the idea of. Conversations we've had with Student Union partners, sabbatical officers, their lot of their worries for the next year is that often the role is they have to build relationships, establish trust, quite quickly with students so that they are engaged in all the opportunities they have. And obviously, with the challenges of the last year, it's quite hard to do that remotely, despite the fact I believe they've done an exemplary job, despite the circumstances. But there is a feeling that this coming term, they're going to have to do it with two cohorts at the same time, which is which is a huge task. So I'm not so concerned that this will be a challenge if unions are given the capacity the support to do what we do know they do best. So think about I suppose societies and clubs, which is play a huge role in how students stay connected, build relationships, and so they don't get isolated and lonely. I think often students just are natural organisers. And if you give them access to booking

systems and little bit of a budget and emails, and accounts to run social media, they will go and do wonders and provide opportunities to each other to engage in stuff. One of the most amazing things I've always believed about universities is how students just do connect and gravitate towards others with similar interests and passions. And I think just giving the space and the opportunity for students to do that, like we did before the pandemic, we'll continue to see that done really well, I just think we need to make sure we remember what worked before the pandemic and give the space to it. Again, obviously, the only huge elephant in the room is thinking about how we support students to do that in a COVID safe way, knowing all the challenges we're going to have going forward. So just making sure all the students are equipped to do that. students understand and know what student unions are there for, and that if there aren't opportunities that they are interested in, societies they'd like the look of, you can always start something new, that has always been the golden ticket, for student unions, whatever you want we will provide it if, if there's enough interest and there always is.

I think we already know the answer to this question. It's just we haven't been practising it because of the pandemic. So I'm hopeful as we return to the way things are it won't be as much for an issue. We know students are keen to be connecting again and have missed this. But it's hard to see whether the anxieties and worries about reconnecting, making friends concerns or being socially anxious, concerns around the pandemic and their physical health, I suppose prevail over the desire to reconnect. So it's one to watch, but I'm hopeful with this one.

Smita Jamdar 36:35

And slightly changing the subject, even prior to the pandemic, students engagement, and the risk of students dropping out because they're not engaged, was clearly a focus for many institutions. So we've got things that worked in the past. Do you think that there needs to be any new roles or resources to support student engagement post pandemic? Or is it just a case of going back to what we had? And perhaps, you know, beefing it up a little bit?

Dominic Smithies 37:15

I'm not sure if I have thoughts on how to do it best. My inclination is that we probably do already have the models but being mindful that - I like the imagery of thinking that we're getting two freshers cohorts at once. I do think that just student unions and university staff will already have had this experience of roles before, they'll need extra capacity, because they're supporting twice the size of the cohort that they used to. So I suppose it's a case of just doubling down on what we already do, already provide, to make sure that that capacity is there. I suppose, just on touching on my final point of, concerns around social anxiety or health, with concerns around the pandemic prevail over the desire to reconnect there might be a role in managing that and thinking about what interventions, what support can be put in place. So student leaders are equipped with the knowledge, competence and skills to manage all of that and to support the students who are somewhat more anxious around pandemic or reintegrating But beyond that I'm confident that I think we know our stuff pretty well. And the student unions are our experts already. So just giving them the support to do what they do best. But a little bit extra, just because I think this coming term will be more of a challenge than we've seen before.

Mhairi Underwood 39:04

I think it's interesting to consider final year students, specifically. We've already talked around first and second year students and some of the risks that exists out there and the support that will likely be needed. But I think it's really important to also recognise that final year students are really worried at the moment, all the research that we're seeing is that the worry has really increased in the pandemic and specifically increased around employability. And I think that universities could potentially play a really important role in terms of confidence building around those around that issue. We've also anecdotally seen some increased interest around postgraduate courses. And we've also seen in our research that a lot of final year students hadn't really as much information about postgraduate courses, so I wonder whether there's a bit of a support piece in there in relation to final year students

Potentially there's some support that also existed before the pandemic that could be kind of pivoted to support students in that quite scary moment when you're suddenly finishing your undergrad. And you've done your undergrad in the majority in the pandemic. So I think it's important to remember the extra support that they might also need.

Dr Camille Kandiko-Howson 41:01

We've heard a lot about the importance of unions, and I think they capture a certain portion of the student population, but I think there's some students who really need these activities to be built into the curriculum for them to reach, particularly mature students who often have very low levels of engagement with the union. Students, especially on different spectrums, sometimes like to engage differently, and I think it's really important that a lot of this needs to be linked through their course. Something we've done at Imperial is some departments have started having student wellbeing officers, so a paid role based in the department. And they've been hugely successful. Research that I've read, coming out from Imperial is, a lot of students can say, that person has really made this year for me, I would have dropped out without him, they're people who help connect, to access Disability Resources, And I think that there's people who are in places to be able to know students individually in the context of their course, but not with the pressure of those people who are going to teach and mark them. And I think that's been a real hallmark, and where we've seen that we've seen huge differences in student satisfaction and students, that there's someone to kind of help connect those dots. And so I think while some institutions that might be done very well, through voluntary roles, were more informally across the student body, I think when it's linked in with the curriculum and with the department, it's better able to make sure that it captures all students rather than some students who might access those services.

Richard Brabner 42:43

Prior to the pandemic, there were certain groups of students who prior to the pandemic were more likely to be lonely. And of course, there are certain groups are less likely to participate in the life of the university to put it in those terms. So when we build back from the pandemic, what can we do to ensure that those inequalities are not exacerbated? And actually, we can perhaps close them in terms of participation?

Hillary Gyebi-Ababio

And I know that you've touched on a few different things. So added resources that an institution's or the sector could bring in to support students. And then also some of the stuff around final year students, which I think was really interesting around the anxieties that they're facing as well. A, I'm really curious whether you had any thoughts about what might be useful for students without overwhelming them when they get back. I think it would be really easy for institutions to want to do everything, and to try and solve everything. But I wondered if you have any contributions that might be helpful about how the sector can go about this in a way that isn't overwhelming for students when they return however they return.

Dominic Smithies 45:25

So loneliness and isolation, it wasn't new, it was there before the pandemic, we know the needs of different student communities needed to be met. I think student unions and liberation networks making sure there are spaces for particular student groups is really important. Completely agree with Camille's point as well and understand there are also some communities that don't typically engage with student unions, that varies nationally, but be mindful of the role other environments have to play in supporting students that student unions don't necessarily cater for, and completely agree with Hillary's point, I think the risk is because students have missed out on so much over the last 18 months at this coming term, they're going to double down on all the opportunities, sign up to twice as many clubs as they would, go out twice as often or twice as hard and the risk of burnout and misconduct and behaviour and being unfamiliar and being in spaces with alcohol. It's a huge risk that I think institutions are going to have to manage going forward because I do think there's a risk on both sides of there being students not engaging for a range of reasons and students doubling down too hard beyond capacity to do.

Alistair Jarvis 47:15

Mhairi, my first question was a specific one for for you. You've mentioned some of the feedback you've heard through The Student Room. I wanted to ask whether there was anything specific to this year's feedback or conversations, which feels different from a normal year? You mentioned, for example, the teacher assess grades, but is there anything else coming through that would be really helpful for universities to know about?

Mhairi Underwood 48:04

Lots is very different to a normal year. This has been a really odd couple of years for us in terms of exams, usually a really big part of the support that we give, throughout the year, both for year 11 and for year 13. Where that hasn't existed, we honestly didn't really know what was gonna happen without an exam season. What was the need was gonna be. And something that we really noticed very early on in the pandemic was the support that started to be required of our community was probably more than what we could have ever really expected. And in a really sort of, I would say, deep sort of emotional way. And I think that a lot of people come to the Student Room as an online community, as opposed to a real life community when they were available for that sense of reassurance. And for a lot of young people, it's around: 'Am I alone in this? Am I weird? Have other people had to deal with this

before?' There's so much in that peer support piece that I think is naturally really important pre pandemic, the pandemic just increased that level of importance tenfold. And what was really interesting was that while every student was having a really different experience, because of what their school may have been doing, what their university may have been doing, what their personal circumstances were, which as we all know, could have been extraordinarily different. What was strangely kind of uniting, I suppose, was that we were all dealing with something that we're going to say the word I've tried to avoid it for a months, it was just really unprecedented. And they all kind of came together.

What we saw was that students were really looking for answers, and they were looking to be spoken to and not about. There are a lot of conversations that still happen, where students are being spoken about and rarely being kind of asked for their involvement in conversations. You see kind of guidance coming out from Government departments for example, from Ofqual, especially when all the exam changes for those students who were sitting their exam us this year on last year, it's really difficult and 80 page document is really difficult for anyone, let alone for a young person dealing with a huge amount of stress in so many other ways. So a big part of what changed for us was helping to disseminate all that information in a way that was helpful for them to understand. So they could then go and take it into the real world.

Broadly in terms of conversation, we saw either a lot more awareness or acknowledgement of the mental health impacts of the pandemic. It's something that's always happened. But I think there have been a lot more open sorts of conversations about that. The mistrusting teacher assess grades, there's a lot of worry that students think they're going to be seen as lesser for having not sat exams. Even if you speak to current first year students, they'll often still say, "Oh, I'm from the cohort who got fake grades", that they don't kind of attribute ownership to the grades that they received. And they still are very worried that they're going to continue to have a negative impact on their lives. There's a lot of worry about University placement. Students this year are really not sure, especially in relation to what happened last year, are there going to be University places for them? As I mentioned earlier, how are their grades going to compare on a national level where there is no national comparison this year? So yeah, a huge amount of change in terms of what we've seen on TSR. But those are just a few sort of highlights

Alistair Jarvis 51:30

A few of your comments that link back to the earlier comment you made about the importance of communications, this year almost more than ever, that clarity of communications, that regular communications is really important. And this is kind of question for the all three panellists. What would you see as as good communications from universities, whether it's style, whether it's content, whether it's regularity, either some good examples or, or good features that you typically recommend.

Mhairi Underwood 52:07

Anecdotally, the conversations that we've seen on the site, and from students that we've done research with, I think there was some discrepancies in terms of two way communication a lot of the time. So it's one thing to be able to communicate information to your student population, your current student population, but also your potential future

student population. But I think we did see some inconsistency in relation to whether students, if they're asking questions, will get answers, for example. Most students knew that their university was doing their very best, but there was just a lot that no one knew throughout the pandemic. And I think what students really found helpful was, was when universities would say, 'look, here's what we don't know. And here's what we do know'. And interestingly, even this week, that's still what they're asking for those comments on the forum where students just want to know where things are at.

Understandably, we'd all love some clarity. And hopefully that will keep coming as we kind of ease out of all these lockdowns. But students really want to be told sort of what they can expect and have that consistency in terms of a two way conversation where they do have questions, and they can get answers from kind of like a real human as well, I think what can be and this is such a resource, Like there's not a never ending resource universities. But I think where they can feel like they're having a conversation, I think it can feel quite meaningful

I think around mental health and well being, the more that university can put their metaphorical arm around students. And I know that there's so many who've been doing an amazing job of this already. And I know everyone's trying just so hard. I think that's what the students are really going to be looking for, is the kind of practical support, but also pastoral care support is more important now than ever. There's the current student but there's also this cohort of students who are coming in now, who I think would really appreciate hearing from universities, feeling like they're coming to a community that will really support them and kind of be there for them, I think is something that comes out a lot.

Dr Camille Kandiko-Howson 54:32

I've heard Karen O'Brien, who's the new incoming vice chancellor at Durham say, you know, you can never communicate enough in a crisis. And I certainly take that on board with students. They need a lot of channels, they often don't read institutional email. You've just got to blast through all of the channels available at the institutional level, at the departmental level, through student services, and keep consistent messaging. It might seem redundant from someone sitting in office saying, "well, we've sent the same message out 10 times", but students aren't receiving it 10 times. So I think that's one key point.

One thing I want to raise is a point of caution, I think we've all been quite optimistic here, but I've heard some institutions kind of feeling like they need to undersell what's on offer this upcoming year so that they're not miss selling with students who want to know what's going to happen, they want to be told what's on offer. And I think for institutions to be very cautious, there's a danger that they will say there will be no lectures at all, because it's easier to say that than say, you might have some and then take them away. So I think there's sort of a balance also in institutions, them getting kind of stuck under selling what is available to students, and then sticking with that throughout the year. So that's kind of a point of caution, about a balance with that consistency, and really clear marketing that then students might get a lesser experience, because it's easier to. I mean, I've heard of some courses saying, well, we're just offering the whole course online next year, because we can guarantee that full stop. And that's probably not best for students. But it's a safe response. But that needs to

be balanced with how flexible we can be, which came back to kind of Mhairi's key point that we raised at the beginning.

Dominic Smithies 56:36

I think some of the best practice I saw often was making sure in terms of the tone of the emails and messages that are going out were just emotionally intelligent, and vulnerable. An understanding of the impact particularly early on, there was a lot of fear, a lot of worry, lots of uncertainty. We don't know how populations will have been impacted by the pandemic, whether they might have contracted it themselves or had loved ones been impacted.I think it was the time where there needed to be a lot of sensitivity to what was going on. So I think that the tone was really important to get right. Absolutely agree about never enough messaging can be done. But I think what's useful for students is to know if they're to be proactive and look for where the messaging, where's the place they need to go to get the latest update. And I think having an understanding that - we will send once a week, or every day, an update from the Vice Chancellor, and you'll get one tomorrow. So knowing to look out for it, knowing when they're being communicated to next and when the next wave of information that's coming in.

Even if that update is there's no more to say than there was yesterday, sorry, we know as much as you do. I think a lot of the challenge, and we touched on this, was communicating the fact universities didn't have all the information and couldn't provide certainty either. And I think communicating the position universities was in is bold, it's vulnerable to say I don't have the answers, it's reassuring. And students don't feel like information is being withheld from them. Obviously, there was just a lot of confusing or lacking guidance coming out for universities to have to understand and translate. I think students broadly felt universities were doing absolutely everything they could. And it's just making sure that the message is consistent. And it's a vulnerable thing to do to say you don't have the answers, but it's reassuring for students to do so.

 Alistair Jarvis 58:46

That came out really clearly in a couple of your answers there about that and saying what you don't know as well as what you do know and actually is reassuring even just to be honest about what you don't know or what you're still trying to try to clarify. And thank you.

Mary Curnock Cook 59:06

Mhairi, I think it was you quoting the voice from students saying "I'm from the cohort that got the fake grades", that took my breath away. It doesn't surprise me in retrospect, but that is something, because this whole confidence thing around students has come through so clearly in a lot of evidence that we've had so far. So that was a real shocker. And I thought also that point about universities feeling that they've got to undersell, not to miss sell them, that's maybe a message we need to get over to our regulators and so on that we need a bit of breathing space around this because the students want that certainty as several of you said.

Stephen Isherwood 1:00:14

In terms of students preparedness for coming back to campus in the autumn, do we do overall think students are ready to come back? And also, as a supplement to that what what do we think are the main the main risk factors for that for that returning cohort, whether it's previous cohorts coming back, or whether it's, you know, new pressures coming onto campus?

Dominic Smithies 1:01:04

A harder one to answer because I think it's obviously going to be just such such a mixed bag. We know as students aren't a homogenous group and for various different reasons will have varying concerns about what next term, what next year holds for them. And I suppose touching upon the earlier discussion about managing the isolation and getting involved, I think lots of the risks and worries that we're hearing coming from students and unions and staff and student engagement roles is kind of response to what Hilary asked about the risk of burnout, students getting involved in too much too quickly and trying to make up for everything they've lost or make the most of it before they're told to lock down again over Christmas.

So I think it's lots of worries about making the most of it. Students broadly largely are keen to be returning and in terms of preparedness and what that means I think there are lots of concerns about what that means. So I completely agree with Camille about having a freshers having a proper welcome week that properly reinducts them into what university life is like, and even a freshers week for third years as well, who are returning after 18 months of not having been at university properly, I think they'll understandably have forgotten what they were told in the first couple of terms that they had on campus.

We have had some concerning trends about going forwards in terms of the more social preparedness of university, students coming back to university to campus and worries about what their behaviour and conduct will be like when in environments around alcohol and drug use and concerns with that. Lots of these young people haven't had the opportunity to be doing that socialising pre university. So there will be a lot of the experimenting, getting comfortable exploring alcohol and going out will be new to lots of students. It's something that I suppose suddenly is going to be even more of a burden for universities and student unions to be managing and supporting students with, when previously they might have had some experience, at least in the summer before or after the A Levels had finished earlier on.

I have heard some reports and trends, I don't know how widespread this is so somewhat anecdotal, but around increases in consent related disciplinaries. And over just the last couple of months, as students have been returning to campus with expectation that trend will continue and increase as more students are returning. Students haven't been together for a long time, what behaviour is and isn't acceptable, I think has been forgotten. I think there's a job of universities to communicate that so students are prepared to behave to the standard we expect so that everyone can have as positive experiences that they deserve. I do have lots of concerns about how students are prepared. There's a lot of work for universities to do to make sure students are equipped to be conducting themselves well and properly so that all of them can have the best time possible.

Dr Camille Kandiko-Howson 1:05:11

I would say overall, there's a lot of work to be done on exams. Coming from Imperial, it's a very exam, heavy institution, and a lot of students. So they need support in sort of induction, we have a number of projects, sort of working with students to kind of help them, and induct them into what they've missed out on. Because normally, there was quite a transition from sort of, you know, what A Levels are, and then you kind of go into university, and so what to expect, and students will need some more support and preparation. And so we have some projects, working with students to kind of help induct them. At the same time, we're working with staff to try and wean them off exams in such a way, so also trying to improve the curriculum as we go along. But that challenge needs to come from both ends.

And I think for each of the year groups, I think Year One particularly they need support with exams, and what their assessments are going to look like. And as Mary mentioned, that confidence so that they feel that they're approaching exams, being prepared in ways they might feel they've been under prepared. And also building that social side, I think Year 2 the priority needs to be on that socialising and building interactive sessions. So students catch up on what they missed out from with the online learning experience, and also starting to build that employability support. That I think, you know, students haven't had some of those early on employability options, and in gaining that early experience that some students do start early on. And I think for year three, it's really about employability opportunities, and really being proactive with students about getting some of that underway, because they will again, have missed out from what normally in year two students start to build that foundation, that preparation for what's coming next. And I think building on Mhairi's points, it's really important to normalise sort of career readiness. Research has come out in the past about students find it helpful to know no one else knows what they're going to do when they grow up. And so it's important to normalise that no, no one's had work, you know, there hasn't been amazing work experience opportunities. So you're not alone. So giving those opportunities, but also positioning it to where students ar at now, that is it being normal, so they don't feel like oh my gosh, someone else started some food delivery startup. And what did I do, and I'm so far behind, you know, but really trying to promote opportunities and work with those businesses that were hear are struggling, and try and connect them with our students who also need some of that transition into gaining some of those skills beyond the curriculum.

Stephen Isherwood 1:07:35

 I mean, even in normal times, actually students sometimes are under the misapprehension. If you haven't had a gold plated internship in a Canary Wharf tower, you've failed, but actually the majority of students don't have that experience at all. So I definitely echo that, it's probably even more important to reinforce some of that.

Mhairi Underwood 1:08:01

I think Camille your point around academic preparedness and kind of those programmes, they sound amazing and just want to raise a flag for the 2022 applicants as well, it's very likely that that support will continue to be needed, because those are the applicants who never sat GCSE exams. It's very likely that they'll sit an adjusted kind of assessments for their A-Level exam. So I think that there's probably going to be a continued need for that.

But I think these sessions are so wonderful now, but I would love it if we could kind of retain some of this learning and be looking towards those 2022 students coming in as well. On employability also just to point out, obviously, a lot of current first year students, who will be second year; and then the year thirteens who are coming in to start in September will have potentially missed any opportunity to do work experience at all, before they've come to university. That was a massive worry for so many of them when they were writing their personal statements, and they had nothing to talk about, because they hadn't been able to do work experience. If they have many of them have done digital work experience so it may be that going into a real life situation of any kind of work experience, when they're at university might be even more daunting for those students, because it could be their very first interaction with something like that.

On a kind of broad level, anecdotally, the indications that I see in my work is that students are pretty keen to come back to campus. I think their main hesitancy is around the potential for everything to get locked down again - are they going to have to go through the same thing that the previous cohorts have been through? And what would the process be if that were the case? So I don't know whether there's a piece for universities in terms of being aware of how they would support students if we were to go into lockdown again, or raising some awareness about the practices that are in place should that be the case. I think in terms of risk areas, there's probably two main ones that I would point out that are pretty broad. Risk continues for those students who may have high levels of anxiety, whether it's COVID related or not COVID related in terms of coming back to campus, especially around that socialising side of things, but not specific to that.

 I think also, there's a risk area that we need to just have our eyes peeled for a little bit where there may be students who don't identify themselves with having mental ill health, they may not ever reach out for support from services, but they may really be struggling. So I think that there could there's a real sort of risk of those students who could fall through the gaps at the moment. Some of the things that we've spoken about, a couple of you have mentioned in the chat, wellbeing champions in certain faculties, talks about, you know, parts of the community that have an eye out for that, I wonder about things like making sure that lecturers and tutors are trained, anyone who interacts with students are kind of able to notice those potential risk signs, and make sure that were that were that there is a potential to fall through the cracks, that we're able to kind of acknowledge those students and get them connected with the support there might be.

Stephen Isherwood 1:11:04

And Camille, just a quick follow up question to you. The Resolution Foundation, talking about the financial crash, they talked about a lost generation, the cohort who started slightly lower, and therefore it took them 10 years to catch up. I wondered if in some of your answers, actually, what we need to be careful of is this, there's a cohort that just almost gets missed out. Because assuming that in 2022, life generally gets back to normal and everybody carries on, employers start just talking to the next cohort of students, is there a danger that actually if we don't implement some of the things we're talking about, this generation almost just gets missed a little bit and forgotten about? And just generally starts with lower expectations then another cohorts in a year or two to come.

Dr Camille Kandiko-Howson 1:11:53

 I mean, I hate reading that I've got small kids. And when I hear "a generation of lost people", you know, people will never catch up for the rest of their lives, I think, Oh, come on, we can do better than that. I think there's a lot of changes. Mary Curnock Cook and I work together with an app called Enlightened all about trying to improve student mental health engagement in universities. And we had a lot on our radar before the pandemic. And so I think we need to think there was a lot that people want to shift. I think we really need to think of these as opportunities to do things differently. There was a lot that could be improved in higher education before the pandemic, that we can improve that we can work on this. There's a lot of new jobs that need to be built, there's a lot of new ways of working that need to be developed. And I think it's about getting this cohort involved in what the world will become, rather than saying, "Oh, you slipped between the cracks", and we're going to go back to what was, you know, an old way of living. So I think it's really about empowering those students to say, you've been through something difficult, and that will actually give you a lot of resilience to take forward. So rather than pathologizing them and saying, "oh, you're such a victims of circumstance", it's saying you've been through so much, look at the changes you can bring to the future. And I think that more positive outlook does a lot for young people. Their future isn't written yet. And I think we need to really empower them to do that.

Mary Curnock Cook 1:13:31

A really quick question: are students worried about COVID as in the disease? We haven't really said that they're worried about getting ill or about bringing the disease to their families? Is that a big thing?

Mhairi Underwood 1:14:09

I think if you're talking about over-18's, less so the more people have been vaccinated, I think the less that worries them, I think there's a very big question mark over anyone under the age of 18 and how they're feeling about it. Obviously, they can't have the vaccine yet. So I think that will play a key role in managing that worry.