Part Two: Student Experience and Engagement

- *Professor Jane Robinson – Pro-Vice Chancellor, Engagement and Place, Newcastle University*
- *Professor Jonathan Grant – Professor of Public Policy, Policy Institute, King's College London*
- *Ben Vulliamy – CEO, University of York Students' Union*
- *Hattie Tollerson – SU President, London South Bank University*
- *Amatey Doku – Consultant, Nous Group*

Mary Curnock Cook 02:57

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. And in this session this afternoon, we're concentrating on student experience, student engagement and participation. This morning, we've had a brilliant session on mental health and wellbeing and I'm sure a lot of that will come up. 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?

Jonathan Grant 06:15

Well, the short answer is yes. I think there's been an incredible response by the whole sector and all communities within the sector to the pandemic. And the fact that we can mobilize so rapidly, innovate reasonably successfully, and continue to deliver our core purposes, is something we should celebrate and not lose sight of. That doesn't mean it's all been perfect. I think inevitably, when you do these sort of exercises, people focus on what hasn't worked. But I think there's a lot of stuff that has worked. One, is the obvious thing of moving learning online. I wouldn't advocate that we should be delivering everything online in the future but I think the lessons around a blended approach and a more flexible approach is something we need to hang on to. Not least because of some of the access arguments around that: students like the flexibility that the alternative mode of delivery has offered.

 I think in a strange sense, right at the beginning of the pandemic I was still VP at Kings so as you know, I was sat in all these horrendous gold meetings and silver meetings and what have you. And yet, in the first few months, it was really all command and control. And that was probably right and inevitable. But I think as we settled into a much more open and networked form of management governance, delivery occurred. And I think on the whole, senior leaders learned that their staff and their students - their people - can deliver without what I would term 'managerialism' that has crept into our institution. So it actually liberated to a degree, some of the systems and I'd like to see that held on to. My final comment was then one around engagement. I sent a note to one of my former colleagues saying, "Can you give me any good stories about student engagement"? And I got a list of 20 responses, all of

which I was not aware of. And I've got another 20 which I am aware of. That level of engagement and that student contribution and staff contribution to local communities - at some point, we've got to find a way of putting that together and really celebrating those contributions.

Mary Curnock Cook 09:11

And Hattie, maybe I could come to you and ask what you'd like to see carry on? And whether that sense of students being much more involved in working with senior leadership in universities was something that you experienced as well?

Hattie Tollerson 09:28

Yeah, definitely. And I think this year has been a really good year, actually, for student voice and student engagement and institutions actually having to listen to what the student experience really is and what issues there are in fixing those very, very quickly. I think, as you've just mentioned actually, we've gotten into a habit in higher education of taking a long, long time to do things. But this has been a great experiment in, "oh, my goodness, let's do something really quickly, we have to do it and make it work for students as best as we can". And I think that's been really exciting actually to see things happen very quickly. So moving to online lectures, changing assessment types, really exploring that digital world of how we can deliver teaching and assessments online. But I think within that, some very important thoughts have been lost. So we haven't taken the time to think about, "what does this mean for a student in real life", "what's really happening in people's home lives now that we're bringing the classroom into their home"? The move to digital learning has obviously been beneficial to some people in terms of access, but for others, like in my institution for example, with parent learners it's made it a bit more difficult at times, especially with the different types of lockdown restrictions. It's exciting to see different types of institutions finally take that lead on listening to students unions, listening to student leaders, taking a lot more time to think about student feedback and putting out poll surveys, module surveys and their mid year reviews. And really looking at that data properly and digging deep into where it's working, what isn't working and splitting that up by demographics and all that stuff.

Mary Curnock Cook 11:00

Ben, does that sound a familiar story to you as well?

Ben Vulliamy 11:07

Yeah it does. That triggered something for me, which is about this really authentic human type of relationship we've now established. I'm exaggerating a little to make a point. But, you know, historically, we had perhaps very, very corporate language we would use when we talk to people that talked about us as an authority and the students as the consumer, or the passenger or call it what you want. And instead, what we've started to show is a bit more authenticity, about our own fears, our own anxieties, our own uncertainty. And I think that's quite precious. I'm not sure it's always landed, but I think if we can maintain some of that kind of honesty about the journey that we are all on together, that will help the relationships we formed with students. The other thing that I'm struck by that I would like to preserve, protect and grow in the future that I have seen over the last couple of years is the way that

our students and our institutions have become much more interested in the places we inhabit. So the fact that we saw nurses accelerating out of their courses of study into the NHS, the fact that we saw students and staff come together to build proper vaccines and testing centers, on campuses, with other local colleges and other institutions, is wonderfully civic. The fact that students will volunteer to bring out the elderly and deliver their medication really early on in this as it came to light. If we can maintain some of that in a way that has a really positive narrative to it - that isn't just underpinning services that are creaking at the seams and are underfunded - that is actually working with our places and our people, then it could be a wonderfully powerful thing to just happen moving forward.

Mary Curnock Cook 13:00

That's wonderful, Ben, and that gives me a wonderful segway to hand the microphone to Jane. Jane, this is your job, isn't it? And did you find that the last year or so has made your job harder or easier? And what would you like to take forward into the future?

Jane Robinson 13:28

There have been both huge challenges, but also opportunities. We have seen rapid innovation in response to the challenges. And I think that has been enabled by this collaboration, and this sense of co-design of solutions with our students, but also with our partners. I would say we have never seen such close working between our civic partners in the NHS, public health, local government, but very much working with our students. And I think just sort of building on some of the points Ben made, our students being seen as and seeing themselves as citizens of place. I think that's really been brought to the fore.

Mary Curnock Cook 14:15

That's such a wonderful idea for our students. And Amatey, you obviously see things through a slightly different lens these days in your current role, but your roots go back to the Student Union as well. Any thoughts from your side about perhaps just briefly what you think is the most important thing to take forward post pandemic?

Amatey Doku 14:46

The thing I think I would just draw out is what's been quite interesting, looking at some of the data around black Asian and minority ethnic student attainment gaps, and how they have actually reduced over the last year. And I don't think we're fully at the bottom of exactly how or why that happened. But clearly, something changed. And if we can find out what things were there that led to some of those changes...obviously, it's not the full extent of the problem, but I think that there might be something...I suspect it's around the more flexible delivery of education, the fact that students had more opportunities to revisit material in a way that previously they hadn't, but also the changes in assessment as well. And actually, when we talk about some of those barriers, often they land in some of those spaces. Now, we know there is the wider package around student experience and the support services which contribute to these challenges as well - but something has changed. And I think it's

important that we try and get to the bottom of that and seek to keep those aspects moving forward.

Mark Blythe 16:46

I'd like to sort of drill into the other aspect of a university experience, which is the extra curriculum activities. I think there's plenty of evidence that hybrid learning has worked really well during the pandemic. But in our recent poll, working with students, over half mentioned that they hadn't had any participation in extracurricular activities. So Hattie, to start, what's the experience at your institution? And what can universities do to increase that student participation in extracurricular activities? Do you think we need to reboot it? And possibly, there's almost two cohorts here: there's a student starting this coming academic year where we would hope that they would just get back into normal, and also the students that have been affected by the pandemic more.

Hattie Tollerson 18:01

Yeah, I think that's a really interesting question, actually. And it lines up quite nicely with the work that we've done as a Students Union in partnership with our institution this year. So this year, we relaunched our strategy. And we are an institution type that knows that our students come to get an academic experience, where they will get better employment from it. So our students are coming to our institution for a purpose. And we knew that as a Students Union, we weren't offering things that lined up with that. So we had to look at other institutions where students unions were being really successful in partnership with the institution. And that was all around academic societies and academic and co curricular activity. So not necessarily offering things like arts and crafts club, but offering an occupational therapy society for occupational therapy students where they can run a conference, get involved in professional spaces. Making sure that we've got one for every single course, so that we're supporting the students learning journey, and making it much more engaging and engaging students with their professional learning communities. So providing that extra experience really, and working with academics to deliver those things. Whether it is a trip out or helping our nurses and our midwife students with things that academics don't have time to deliver. We're there to step in and help along with that. And I think it's really interesting because it seems to be really working. And I think the extra and co curricular activity, that's the biggest thing that's had take up in the pandemic - students that are looking for that extra help with that learning loss almost. But they've been able to take part in it and then we've not been able to stop those things, despite the pandemic, where the sports and some other societies have had a real struggle this year to to gain engagement. Our academic societies program has absolutely exploded.

Mark Blythe 19:47

That's interesting, isn't it? I think it's quite interesting. I'm really encouraged by that co curricular, but I wonder what your view is from a student union about the extracurricular? If you're doing a course in construction, what about actually being really interested art over here, because that's what your passion is? Has that gone? Can that come back? Is that valued by student unions?

Hattie Tollerson 20:12

Yeah. And I think that's going to be the struggle this year in gaining back organized fun. NUS and some other organizations and BUCS as well, have done a lot of research into this: that we will have almost a lost generation of student leaders, because a lot of what we do is obviously engaging students to lead those activities. And that might be really difficult to get back because we've had a year where activities essentially stopped. But it's about putting resources into training our students in upskilling and providing them those opportunities to again, learn things they wouldn't learn on their course - like project management, or leadership or that kind of stuff, to get experience in those things. And I think it is possible to get back to this lost generation of activities. I think it's how we frame it, and how we engage students in these activities and showing them that it's not just "oh get involved in the Disney society", it's like, "you're going to get a really solid community of friends around you". That's the reason why I didn't drop out of university. And many other sabbatical officers and many other students that are engaged in activities across the sector will tell you that being involved in the netball team or being involved in the gaming society is the reason that they're at university. And I think there's actually some really interesting dynamics with that in terms of our student diversity and our student populations. I think one thing that I really like to harp on about is that our BAME community of students are two to three times more likely less to drop out of university if they're involved with activities.

Ben Vulliamy 22:02

Let me tell a very quick story of the year in terms of co curricular activity. September the 29th was pre arrival and we had our first ever online freshers fair, giving students a choice of clubs, societies, volunteering programs, to get involved in. We had 9059 individual student hits pre arrival. Of those 9059 requests for further information, the most popular groups they were asking about were: outdoor society was top (that tells us something), dog walking society was second, debating society was third, badminton, baking, feminist society, yoga, murder mystery society, movie society. So lots of kind of outdoorsy things there lots of stuff about dialogue and discussion and debate. That's incredible. Roll forward to term two, and they've joined clubs and societies. But those societies have been a bit more, dare I say dormant than they expected - a little bit more online and less physical than they helped and aspired for. And actually, by that time, we were actually rebating 8000 pounds worth of sports club memberships to sports team signups.

We were saying, "look, you signed up to the football team because you wanted to play football at a high level and meet people and train to get there. You didn't get to do that. You have done a lot of cool online fundraising, you have done an online quiz, you have maybe done some one on one training and coaching or whatever else, but you didn't get to play football, so we need to give you your money back". So they did some stuff within the football society. But it wasn't what they signed up for. That's quite notable when you think about what's happening with the debate about tuition fees, but we've taken different standpoints from that. Interestingly, in term two - so this was as we were in full lockdown - there were 2762 unique students signed up to one or more academic society. So these are the societies that bring, for example the math discipline and maybe set up some online maths tuition for local schools or whatever it might be. So that was preserved quite well, around about quarter of our students were signed up. So I mean, that's the story we've experienced. I totally agree

there is a risk of a lost generation here and that there are some students who came to university and spent 12 months making friends within the halls of residence because they were locked in - and we need to break that. There are phrases I've heard our staff and our students use which is "double freshers", which I think is interesting where they're saying, "okay, normally we would do a freshers arrival orientation program, where we showcase student life to new students. This year, we're going to have to prepare to do it to new and returning students". We are preparing to try and give out 30,000 pounds worth of free memberships to our students. We're not sure if we can do it yet. But we're trying to look at if we can seed fund the reinvention of student societies, there's this extra and co curricular programme of activities.

Mark Blythe 25:11

So I guess one of the key takeaways is this extra fresher fair for the students that had a very virtual year last year to reintroduce them to the wider excitement of university. Jane, on the issue of place and engagement, that must be really exciting because we've got this amazing resource of your students that we want to get them doing things out with their degree. Surely we can use them to go out to engage with the wider community in many different ways, which will be a boost to the students and to your engagement with your civic society?

Professor Jane Robinson

Yes, absolutely. What was really incredible this year was we actually saw more - more than ever - our students engaging in that way. We have an annual pride in Newcastle awards, and we had over 900 nominations for students who had been engaged in activities. And that ranged from things like our nest program, which stands for northeast solidarity and teaching, which connects student volunteers to asylum seekers and refugees. We have a link to that, we've developed our civic university agreement working in the city in partnership with Northumbria University. And we've developed a strand called 'students as partners', which is working with our partners in the city. So student volunteering activity has been really more visible than ever before. And as you say that the thing about it is very much the sense that this is something that students themselves are really positive about engaging in and benefiting from in terms of transferable skills. But also it's a very significant benefit to the local community. So actually, ironically, we have seen that extracurricular activity grow over the last 18 months.

Mark Blythe

Has that engagement with place amongst students increased during COVID? If you look back to pre COVID, and then how do we take that forward? How do we encourage that amongst our student cohorts going forward?

Professor Jane Robinson

I think in short, it has. And part of that, if I'm honest, is that there have been some challenges in terms of communities while we've had high populations of students and outbreaks in the pandemic, which has really forced us to think about how we work with those local communities. So I think it's about building those and continuing on those relationships to make sure that we can continue to build on what we've learned over the last year or so.

Hillary Gyebi-Ababio 28:23

know that in what you've all discussed, you talked about the richness of extracurricular activities and things that students do outside of what they've done traditionally. There's been a really important link about students not using it for what it traditionally was used for. So like, people joining football clubs and doing runs to raise money for the NHS. I was wondering if you had any reflections on how students have been able to be linked up with the university, the community and the Students Union, and really being able to work as part of that during the pandemic and how that might influence going forward?

Jonathan Grant 29:21

So my comment, and it sort of is tangential to Hillary's question. I just think we need to be careful when we talk about places. Because what we have experienced over the last 18 months, is a virtual base for lots of people, and a place that is not physically the same as the university they are attending. So in Jane's example, no doubt Jane had lots of students in Newcastle and they made a contribution to the place of Newcastle, but I suspect there are lots of students who were students no longer residing in Newcastle. And we cannot forget those students in these conversations.

Professor Jane Robinson 30:36

Just very briefly. I think perhaps picking up a bit on Hillary's question. We ran a scheme, which was a peer mentor scheme, which was around UN Sustainable Development Goal challenges for new students. And that was all online. But what was great about that was that it was an opportunity for new students to connect with existing students through peer mentoring, but putting it into the context of UN SDGs, and a sort of challenge, so they could think about both. Their local place, but what that meant on a global scale as well. That was something that was really well received. And we're going to look to run that again in the future.

Mary Curnock Cook 31:20

I've certainly been reading about online teaching and learning, about how place doesn't stop being important just because you're learning online. And perhaps our conceptualization of what place means changes slightly. But it definitely doesn't go away.

Richard Brabner 31:49

.So I'm going to kick off with a question for Amatey. Amatey, we've just heard from Jonathan and from others around how engagement is something that we want to maintain, post or through the last bit of the pandemic. And you've been working as a consultant around supporting the development of university strategies and the implementation of those strategies. And of course, you'll have a lot of experience of this from an NUS point of view. What have you seen in terms of the change in thinking around student engagement with in the universities priorities and their strategies? And what would you like to see change going forward?

Amatey Doku 32:38

That's a really good question. I think the first thing I would say is that -and this may just be because we're dealing with a relatively small sample in the last year- one of the challenges that has happened is that university strategies in general have been through a bit of a rough patch. In one sense, some of the strategic initiatives have had to be canned. Some have gone for shorter interim strategies, and others are thinking big and completely changing. But I haven't been on any pieces of work, or any projects, which have been a sort of COVID strategy.

Having said that, I think like the conversation we were having earlier, universities have had to become far more attuned to the student experience, in a much more real time way now. So I think previously, universities it would have been a bit more of a focus on NSS and some of the kind of big milestones in the student feedback calendar. Whereas actually they've had to get a bit smarter, trying to get that real time information, but because they've been making a lot of quick changes, and need to get a sense early on, for what that looks like. Now, you get that through...in some cases, pulse surveys, I have seen some institutions adopt more regular engagement with students and there are lots of digital tools to do that. But you also just get that through more conversations. And the link with the student union which Hattie was talking about has been a critical part of that. What I haven't seen yet is that translate into - this just might be my exposure - a new strategic direction in which student engagement is completely reconceptualised in a different way. I think if that is wanting to come out of it, that is something that I'd really want to see, not forgetting the possibilities that there are in the digital world and in that connectivity. In that way, there are possibilities there from a student engagement point of view that we should seek to utilize, as well, but I haven't seen it yet, sort of COVID being a big strategic shift. I think the institutions that were doing it already really well have continued to do so, but I haven't really seen it.

Richard Brabner 35:26

Do you have any thoughts on how you'd like to see it shift? Or is it too early to say?

Amatey Doku 35:43

One of the challenges that w you have with student experience as a whole is that it straddles lots and lots of different portfolios. So we're starting to see some kind of PVC student experience roles, which are trying to bring together all the different elements of the student experience, but traditionally part of it was assigned the education portfolio, other bits on the professional services side with student support. And that kind of disjointed element means that you don't often sometimes get that whole picture of the student journey. I happen to think the same with staff in terms of really elevating the role of the staff journey as well to that to that senior table. Rather, it's kind of been buried in HR somewhere in professional services. I would like to see a bit more of a move to Chief Student Officers, people who are able to kind of take that portfolio and really have the clout in the institution to make sure that all elements of the student journey are lined up, everyone understands the role they play in the student experience. And that person has the kind of authority to really make the changes that they need to make in a particular department, particularly to deal with barriers to the student experience, and particularly when we're talking about it from an equity point of view, as well. But that's rewriting portfolios on the senior team. And that's a tricky conversation.

But I think there's something there about, if you really want to get a handle of it, somewhere, you really need to be joining up all elements of the student experience, both academic and non academic, otherwise, you just get a really disjointed picture.

Richard Brabner 37:31

Thank you for that. And it's a fascinating answer. Jonathan's gonna hand over to you.Given you obviously lead service learning at Kings, and obviously worked internationally on some of these issues. We were talking about embedding engagement within the curriculum and the importance of that, particularly thinking about inclusivity. I'm focusing really more on the sort of student experience element of this, what's the barriers to doing that post pandemic? How do we ensure that experiential learning is more thoroughly embedded into the student experience?

Jonathan Grant 38:38

I've sort of had this idea in the back of my head that actually what we need is a Chief People Officer, which is, you know, a top level post, which looks after the student experience and the staff experience. So clearly, the extra curricular stuff we were talking about in the previous conversation is critically important and has been sort of damaged, shall we say, as we go through the pandemic, and your survey, the Sutton Trust survey and some of the data I've seen from King's, backs all of that up. But there are, as you well know, deep inequities, in who can access that extracurricular opportunities, and they're are ways of addressing some of those equities. So at Kings, we have something called the King's Leadership Academy, which actually provides bursaries so people can participate in that extra curricular activity. But one of the advantages of service learning in the broadest sense is actually it brings those opportunities inside the curriculum, you overcome those equity challenges that you face.

 One of the things we did at King's was that we put in place a program to introduce service led learning. There's a whole literature on this and everybody's got their own definition. My definition is, broadly speaking, is that there's an academic component in the classroom, when you learn about something, there's an application of that in the community, however you defined it, but it's outside the classroom, and it's outside your sort of student community. And then there's a self reflective element to that. So what did you learn, what worked, what didn't work? The point of service learning as it brings in that extra, that potentially extra curricular experience inside the curriculum, and I think they're very important equity issues in that. One of the things that King's that we were on the way to doing now is to make it not compulsory, but strongly encouraged, as part of reforms around the first year undergraduate courses that every student does at least one module of service led learning through their degree. Now, some of the more professional degrees, that's harder. But that's the aspiration. And if you look at the US universities, I have to say they're well ahead on this topic, compared to what we offer in the UK. But to answer your question coming out of this, I think more commitments around service led learning would be a great lesson to take forward.

Richard Brabner 41:32

Thank you for that. Jonathan. Hattie and Ben I think there's some really interesting questions here for you around the student voice in all of this, and the role of student unions, particularly thinking about students who - we hate the term catch up on this commission, so I'm not going to use it - but thinking about the opportunities which students can take next year, which they may not taken last year, what concerns you, what are you optimistic about? What can universities, students, unions and services do to perhaps help manage the pressures which we might all be under for students to capitalize on those opportunities?

Hattie Tollerson 42:27

We've got a cohort of third year students that spend have most of their time learning in the pandemic, learning at home, probably feeling quite disenfranchised, not feeling like this has been the experience that they signed up to get. We've got a long way to go with winning those students back and bringing them back on side and making them feel like this university experience, although it's not been what you wanted it to be, it's still going to be valuable, you should dig your heels in, finish and graduate and that we should do everything we can to ensure student's success along the journey. So taking the time to stop and listen to what students need, and actually thinking about it holistically. I think it's really important that with thinking a lot more now about well being and welfare within mental health support, and all that kind of community support. I think one thing that I've realized this year is that lecturers are not just lecturers anymore, they're a contact point for students.

It's been really difficult for a student that hasn't ever been on campus to understand, you know, where the mental health support is, where the well being is all that kind of student experience that usually sits around the outside, that's actually been really integral to ensuring a student's success this year. And I think we've asked a lot of academics this year, and probably thinking about how we support them to support students is something that we need to consider a little bit more because it's been a really tough year for academics and for staff as much as it has been for students. I think as well, not just ensuring student's success now, ensuring that we get them to graduation, through their assessments, what can we do do to help that and how do we still kind of remain that degree of integrity and not devaluing degree that our students have, still ensuring that they're getting everything they need out of it on their skills?

So a lot of degrees at South Bank are skills based learning, lab workshops, practicals, placements, they have all have been missed out on how do we catch up on that this year, without necessarily stressing out academics in more than they're feeling already, I'm sure. And then how are we equipping them for life after graduation and what we're doing to get them into the job market if that's what they're looking for or on to further study. There's a couple of things I've seen around is like free masters or reduced masters programs, or skills catch up learning over the summer. And I think all that stuff is gonna be really valuable

Richard Brabner 44:51

Thank you, Ben, Did you have any sort of reflections on that?

Ben Vulliamy 44:55

Thinking more holistically is the key to success here and students want to feel well networked with decisions and with communities and so on. There's a rich history of students, although sometimes they're accused of being quite selfish, being quite self reflective and thinking of their own needs. They show great solidarity to lecturers, they show great passion about the communities around them in all sorts of different ways. If we think about those relationships, and those communities really holistically, it will plug them into working out a way forward. Quite often I hear people, both students and university managers and others talking about, you know, I wanted to go back to how it used to be before COVID. Now I get that temptation, I've lost freedoms, I've lost friends, over the last year and a half, I get why I would like to go back. But I'd like to go forward. And if I can use this appetite, these relationships, network students into the sorts of decisions on how the university might evolve, and how students' experience might become more plugged into the curriculum, and, they will welcome that opportunity to build solidarity with the people around them.

The comments a minute ago about creating a kind of Chief Student Officer or that sort of thing are really interesting. But I would urge a little bit of caution about this, it can't be siloed, you can't create one person who sits on a board and networks for 20,000 students. I think at times, you know, Student Union presidents and sometimes the CEO's have been asked to try and do exactly that. And in many ways, I have kind of valued the close proximity I've had to decisions in York during COVID. In other ways, I can't sustain it, either in terms of the workload, or in terms of true integrity of being able to represent 20,000 students' diverse interests, it's impossible. So we have to find a way of bringing students in rather than a nominated professional responsible for them.

Professor Mary Stuart 47:56

My question relates to the fact that there's a lot of research, including my own, actually, about the importance of students feeling they can belong to their institution, that community. And, obviously, that also relates to the culture of the place, the prior experience of students, and the experience the students find when they engage with that culture. But I was wondering about it because of the pandemic, I think a lot of the research has taken for granted the notion of place being a physical place. And I'm now referring to Jonathan's point earlier, that place can be either physical or virtual, perhaps even something else, especially when you're talking about belonging. And we are very interested Jane in the work that you're doing in your portfolio.

Jane Robinson 49:23

I talked before about the notion of thinking about students as citizens and citizens of place and global citizens. I think that it is really important that we recognize that our students have that role and that sense of their own sort of contribution and agency. One of the things we've given quite a lot of thought to is the fact that for the cohort who are coming to the university next year, they won't have had the opportunity to have visited Newcastle, have open days, to

sort of get a sense of, the layout of the city, the culture of the city. So we've been thinking really hard and working with our partners about how you can actually build that connection. And I mentioned before as well, the sort of the peer mentoring process, which I think is really, important in terms of building networks and context about the place. One of the things I was reflecting on- it's always really fascinating to hear other people's sort of experiences and perspectives- over the last 18 months, we've had much more of a sense of the fact that people have lives outside of the university. So for all of us, we've all sat there on zooms and seeing people's cats walking across in front of it, it's a great, great leveller.

I think we have become aware of the challenges of digital inclusion, and the fact that people have caring responsibilities. Our students, we're not necessarily talking about a homogenous group, you know, they have different experiences, different needs. And I do think that, you know, it is really importan we think about that. As other colleagues have referenced, the challenge with the pandemic is that it has and it continues to exacerbate existing inequalities. Thinking about a lot of the work that we've done in Newcastle and the North East, where we're sort of thinking about the student journey as being much more than the tthree years that a traditional undergraduate might be with us; what is their experience in schools before they come to the university? How do we connect them and make sure they feel they belong, as you say, which is so important whilst at university, but also critically what happens next?

I think some of the points Hattie was making about students who are going to be going into a labor market, you know, what is our role? And how do we create the best possible chances for those students to find fulfilling roles when they leave the university because again, for me, this doesn't sit in silos, what is good for the student experience is often good for a wider community and the sort of societal benefits that come with that.

One example I'd share is we developed an approach around an enrichment week, during lockdown, which was all all online. But we've learned from that, and we're going to be embedding that into our academic timetable, because I do agree with the comments that you the sort of extra curricular in the curriculum, you know, that experiential learning actually should be linked. And what we're doing within that is focusing how students can actually make things happen and have an impact in their community, but linking it back to their academic learning. We develop those projects with our students, and our city partners as well as local communities. That sense of then the learning is connected with our impact in place, and the evidence is that that actually has very positive outcomes for students.

Professor Mary Stuart

I wanted to turn to Jonathan. One of the things you're talking about is virtual communities. Do you think in this year of the pandemic, that we've seen a sense of belonging around virtual communities? Or is it just a sense of loss? Because I think that's one of the fundamental questions we're trying to ask in, in this commission, actually. So is it about loss? Or have we seen belonging developing through virtual engagement?

Jonathan Grant 54:17

To a degree I don't think those are mutually exclusive. I think you can have loss and you can have belonging at the same time. And this sense of belonging, I'm wondering, I don't want to get too hard on this. Is that an old power concept? If you read new power and the original book, they talk about conditional affiliations. Which is not about long term affiliations, is not about loyalty is about dipping in and dipping out and the illusion got quite out of data around that, wherever that's around political affiliations, whether it's very campaigning, whether it's around buying labels, you know, clothes or labels, or whatever it is. I absolutely accept that the existing research tells us that belonging is very important. I'm not disputing that. But I'm just wondering if you sort of moved to a new power Gen Zed world, weather conditional affiliation actually goes up the agenda. And the issue of belonging is redefined in a way. Now that a sort of hypothesis. I can't give an answer to that.

Professor Mary Stuart 55:42

I remember a quote from a really influential book on me, where it said, the student in interview said, "I go through uni. uni doesn't go through me". I think that's exactly the point that you're making. And it might well be that actually, our entire way we've conceived of this through the pandemic, wow, might be actually moving us to something quite different. But I'd very much like to hear from from Hattie, if that's okay. You talked about the loss that students felt in not getting quite what they had expected. I wonder if you've got any comments on this belonging issue.

Hattie Tollerson 56:42

I was actually just thinking that a lot of our students, and for a lot of inner city, modern universities, I think a lot of our students wouldn't first and foremost identify themselves as a student, they'd identify themselves as a parent, as a learner but it doesn't stop them from wearing a lanyard all the time, because I'm really, really proud of the fact that - I'm at university, I'm the first person in my family to go to university, and this is amazing.

But at the same time, we've got to recognize that if you're the first person in your family to go to university, you don't understand or recognize all these structures, and how to go through , them. And if you need help them, then what do you do and the kinds of things and thinking that you don't fit in or you don't belong, I'm not gonna join a sports team, that's for all those traditional types of learners and traditional people that go to university, it's not for me, I don't fit in here.

But at the same time, they're really proud of that university, and they'll work their socks off to get their first degree or their 2.1 and their whole family will be at graduation. And actually, that's really, really powerful. So how do we ensure we're treating them with as much respect as they're treating their lanyards and their student IDs or their graduation certificates? And what can we do to ensure that we're fitting into their lifestyle, and that we're not just assuming that everyone can access learning at the same rate that everyone else in their course can.

Like someone's just said we've had classrooms in people's homes, we can see how difficult or easy it's been for different types of people. It's not been a one size fits all for learning from

home. We ran a phone banking campaign. And I think one thing that really stood out is that although some people were saying, "I prefer to learn from home" or "it's been Okay, I've got a laptop and stuff". But the same time there was a woman that I spoke to said "I've had to give my laptop to my son, because he's doing his A Levels and GCSEs. So I've been doing my lectures from my phone, or I've got to now do a presentation to my whole class, my cohort from my iPhone and I don't know how that's going to work".

Even though the university is offering free laptops or free resources is it still good enough that you're going to give an engineering student a little Chromebook, that's not going to work to run all the technical software and software needs. We can't always just be throwing money at a problem. It's about respecting students as much as they're going to be respecting their degree. And I think this new generation of university students, we are very aware that we're going to be racking up £60-70,000 pounds worth of debt, and are not coming to uni for fun anymore. That's where some of that extra curricular and perception stuff comes in. People want to be taking part in academic opportunities more and more, and people are pushing themselves to get degrees. This isn't just them saying 'Oh I'll go to uni", it's a big commitment, for people that have made that decision to ce to university is quite a big step now, as opposed to previous generations of people that have come into higher education.

Mary Curnock Cook 59:44

That made me think about how quick we are to put things into the online or the face to face silo and I think we've done that around teaching and learning. I think there's a danger that we start to think that communities and belonging have to be in one pot or the other when actually, you need a sort of omni channel community and an omni channel sense of belonging.

Alistair Jarvis 1:00:21

The challenge of being the fifth person to ask you questions, we've had such rich and deep answers from you all, I think I'm in fear of asking you the same things again. So I'm going to come from a slightly different angle, but do say if you think this has been covered, covered enough already, and we've had a year 18 months, where universities I think will agree have made a big contribution to tackling the pandemic, and then challenges the pandemic. But we're moving now into a year, which we certainly hope is a year of economic and social recovery. I'm interested to know what you think universities and indeed Student Unions should be doing differently to maximize their contribution to this recovery. And given that the theme is very much sort of student focused, I'm particularly interested in how what you see is the role of students, perhaps also international students that we haven't touched on particularly in this session, to that economic and social recover.

Professor Jane Robinson

In many ways, we're sort of seeing a real spotlight on the role that universities and students can have. The UUK work on economic and social recovery is something that I've been working with the Vice Chancellor of Newcastle, Chris Day on. The most obvious one is around future workforce. Some of the research shows that over the next five years, universities in the country will be providing nearly 200,000 nurses and nearly 188,000

teachers. Making sure that we are really kind of developing programs that equip our students to be able to go into those key roles is absolutely critical. It's interesting, the debates that are going on at the moment around skills, higher level skills, technical skills, and how we can sort of work with our employers, and our students during their time at university to make sure that they are well placed to contribute to that.

I think the other point that you make about the kind of global contribute contribution there's the obvious sense that actually, international students have a huge economic impact on the places. You know, in Newcastle, our international students contribute over 175 million pounds to the local economy. So it is massive, but actually, I think what is even more important is the global connectivity that comes with our students, and not just in economic terms, but the cultural diversity, and perspectives, the creativity that comes from that, I think, is something that can't be underestimated. Finally, I think there is something really about future leaders. You know, a lot of things we've talked about today are the examples of where our students have really stepped up to the plate and really made a huge difference in their communities that some of the most challenging times that we've had really post war time. And in Newcastle, for example, we've been running a program with Common Purpose called Newcastle 150, which is working with young people between the ages of about 18 and 24 to ask them what they want their legacy to be as, as leaders in terms of making Newcastle a place that is cleaner and greener and more inclusive. And I think giving that agency is going to be really important in terms of the future recovery of the city in the wider region.

Alistair Jarvis 1:04:35

Hattie - do you think universities are doing enough to help should think about how the world may be different post pandemic and in fact, the role they may want to play as leaders in the workforce is also going to be potentially quite different?

Hattie Tollerson 1:04:54

At LSBU, we've got a lot of technical skills and our schools are quite plugged into the workforce and we've got lots of partnerships with industries. So our lecturers are live in the workforce in that term and pushing students and bringing in new ideas and new theories and new ways of working into the classrooms, which you might not get in a more traditional institution. What's interesting about Southbank, as well as it were a group, so we have schools and a couple of colleges attached to, s there's all the linked learning linking FE and HE. And what I'd say about working with a local community is that Southbank- the executive- are really good identifying what the local community needs. So not only are we building buildings for ourselves, but we're building them for their community, and we're going to open one in January, it's going to be our Learning Hub. And people can come in and do free courses on skills for learning and digital skills, and all that kind of stuff. And this will create a real community hub where there might not necessarily be one already.

And we're also working with the council in Croydon. So they identified that there's a severe lack of nurses in South London, and South Bank said, "Hey, we'd like to build a campus,, if you can help us out with that, and we'll train those nurses for you, and we'll help you out with tha"t. So that's been a really great example of, especially within the pandemic, our nursing students, and our nursing lecturers and academics have really jumped to the opportunity to

take part and help out, you know, in London, it's been quite stressful, and the rates have been high with COVID.

And, obviously, it's helped our students a lot, we had that sixth month period where nursing students were able to have paid places and that was amazing for me to see that our students can get that real hands on learning experience, and they love to be a part of, that workforce and part of that frontline. I was quite scared for our students, because I'm obviously represented them, I was worried about health and safety, like are our students getting really sick if we push them to the frontline. But actually we did some research and asked our students, how are you feeling? And they said "this is amazing, this is exactly why I want to be a nurse".

Alistair Jarvis 1:07:22

What a fantastic example. And it's great to hear that, that enthusiasm from students to sort of participate in that way.

Ben Vulliamy 1:07:33

There are lots of agendas that students share with other parts of society. And for me this is the massive opportunity that universities have got right now is to find those shared agendas, and to push them really quite hard. So we know that, as we hopefully pull out of the pandemic, the buses are going to start running again. And we know that students moan about public transport, but so does the unemployed person who's trying to get to their job, or the elderly person who's trying to pick up their meds or you know, or the business who's trying to make sure they can get customers into their shop. We know that students understandably moan about the quality of private landlords, but so does the young professional who's just got on the ladder so actually, let's join together the shared agendas around housing and health and transport, environmental impacts, and you know, international travel, I want to travel abroad, as much as be able to welcome international students from abroad. So if we can hook all that together, I mean, this is kind of mass mobilization 101 right, you know, and it's about common solutions to share problems,

 Jonathan Grant 1:09:03

I want to pick up on the international student thing. So I think it's really important. As we come out of this pandemic, we start to understand the motivations for international students, which has got to be around cultural competencies, diversity and understanding others. In our current system, and I know this is going to take me away from education, the motivation for many universities around international students is cross subsidizing research. And if there's one policy that we could make to change the situation, it would be move to full economic costs, 100% full economic costs, cut the volume of research by 20%. I'm very comfortable with that. And by doing that, you would then create the right motivation to bring international students rather than seeing international students as a cash cow. And it seems to me that, the systems are so interconnected, you can't have a conversation about international students without acknowledging that issue. But if we can come out of the pandemic, address that issue, and see international students as diversifying our student communities, then I'm wholly supportive. If we see international students as subsidizing, under-costed research, then we need to have a different conversation.

Alistair Jarvis 1:10:29

Amatey, you've got a brilliant sort of overview of the sector, both as a student leader and now in your current role. What is it that universities student unions can do to kind of unleash this, you know, power and enthusiasm of students on the recovery?

Amatey Doku 1:10:50

 I'll start with the the challenging aspects of this, and then end on the positive. The one thing I think we do need to recognize and I don't know what the answer to this challenge is, is that and if we're talking about, the younger Gen Z students, we also do need to recognize that their economic position is incredibly challenging coming out of university. The market that there'll be graduating into during the pandemic is hugely, hugely challenging. And all the stats around rent costs and the likelihood of owning their own home and the relative wealth that generation has compared to previous generations at that age. It's a really, really difficult picture. So in one sense, when we talk about economic recovery, there needs to be something about how do they also benefit more from the pie, as it were, and in terms of being able to put that generation in a less than equal position.

 What is their role in that? I'm not sure. But I think we need to recognize that they are also for in need of being leveled up as a generation. And that obviously cuts across the country. One of the really interesting projects, though, that I've been involved in is, and we just had a session yesterday, as part of a university access and participation plan, they put together a project where some of their students from a range of disciplines are trained up to be consultants, and they do projects for the local council. And the counselor identifies a couple of areas where there are needs then they get the training. So we've just finished their training, then they go off, and they do sort of six week project, write up a report and, and the initial feedback, we've just got the initial feedback from the counselors and it has been absolutely fantastic. They have really benefited from the new perspectives on these issues, it's given them the space and the time to really think through what some of the challenges are. And there's a real convergence of interest there. For the students, they get practical experience and work experience, working with a team with students from other disciplines, which they wouldn't normally work with, to solve real challenges, that the local council of the local community facing. So that's one model. But I think that's an example of, and you can do this lots of different ways through community organizing efforts, as well. But I think this is one of the ways in which we need to start thinking about, how can we get students even moving away from the traditional placement model, which is fairly individual, in lots of cases, so as an individual student, you get put on an individual placement, but actually thinking about bringing students together in teams to solve local challenges, I think is something that I'd like to see more of, and I think would really benefit, let's bring that diversity of thinking to local economic recovery.