

TURBOCHARGING THE FUTURE

The Interim Report of the UPP Foundation Student
Futures Commission

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Table of Contents

Foreword	3
Introduction	6
Teaching and learning in higher education has changed dramatically but can the sector keep up with this acceleration?	9
The closure of schools and universities has significantly impacted student preparedness and confidence	12
Getting transitions right has never been more important	15
Concerns around student mental health and wellbeing were already front of mind for the sector – and the issues have been exacerbated by the pandemic	18
Getting this next term right for students, new and returning, has never been more important.	20
Methodology	23
References	28

Forward: Mary Curnock Cook CBE, Chair of the UPP Foundation Student Futures Commission

During the months of intensive oral and written evidence-gathering for the UPP Foundation Student Futures Commission, we were flooded with thoughtful insights and reflections from across the higher education sector. But two moments stand out for me as serious wake-up calls.

The first was a comment from Geoff Layer, chair of the Disabled Students' Commission, who noted that disabled students felt that the things they had been asking for over many years, but were told they couldn't have, had been delivered in days and weeks when the pandemic hit. Disabled students too often languish at the bottom of to-do lists because the interests of the majority non-disabled students' needs tend to come first. This must change: anything we can do to make disabled students' lives easier needs to be prioritised.

The comment also highlighted that colleagues in higher education have worked incredibly hard to react to the shocking circumstances of the pandemic and have perhaps surprised themselves at what they turned out to be capable of. Not that anyone wants HE staff to continue to work under the intense pressure that has prevailed in the past 18 months but it is a salutary lesson in change management and pace, albeit in crisis mode.

The second was feedback from Mhairi Underwood from The Student Room, who had heard students identifying as being from the "cohort with the fake grades". The idea that young people feel that their grades are somehow not worthy speaks to the wider sense of low confidence that students have articulated as we collected our evidence. Most students feel they are below where they should be academically; they are anxious about their rusty social skills, and worry about developing social and professional relationships. They are downcast about their job prospects when they graduate, with many turning to "panic Masters" to postpone their entry to what they perceive to be a disastrously competitive recruitment market.

Although the commission has yet to complete its evidence on graduate jobs and employability, I have been dismayed to hear that many employers don't even bother to acknowledge job applications, let alone give feedback. Shame on them. Young people have borne the brunt of the fallout from the pandemic, with their studies online, socialising curtailed, summer and on-campus jobs drying up, and the absence of so many rites of passage into young adulthood – school-leaving rituals and graduation ceremonies amongst them. Employers are the grown-ups here, and they should know better.



Our interim report articulates this sense of low confidence and uncertainty among students and points to a number of areas where the sector will want to prioritise resources. Much has been said about the downsides of online learning for students – and digital inequality remains a significant barrier to engagement – but the academic community has also noted plenty of benefits, not least for opening up innovation in learning design, which in turn seems to have played a role in improving inclusion for diverse students.

In particular, real strides have been made in assessment where less time-pressured exam-hall and more open-book plus more time have allowed many to showcase their academic capability and progress in ways that have been something of a revelation to students and academics alike. There is an important job to do to counteract the negative framing of digitally enhanced learning in the public domain so that continuing to deploy aspects of teaching online is understood as a positive enhancement compared to the pre-Covid era.

Unsurprisingly, the evidence also highlights the potential for a worsening mental wellbeing crisis amongst students and this will need to be an enduring priority for universities in the coming years. But we heard about amazing initiatives put in place to head off mental health problems, including the attention being given to transitions, not just for incoming first year students, but also for returners to campus. Student support services have learned of benefits to offering online or remote services, sometimes finding those dubbed “hard-to-reach” a little less so when the offer is made more flexible.

Student engagement has long been a challenge for universities but the crisis appears to have crystallised the concept of “belonging” as a more inclusive and affiliative framing of the idea. Many universities will be thinking hard about how to foster this sense of belonging, through service and volunteering, through extra-curricular activities and through more authentic communication with students. Students want to be talked to, not about.

In everything discussed about students, it is clear that those from poorer backgrounds, and non-traditional students more generally, have been most affected by the pandemic – whether through digital inequality, financial poverty, or lack of wider community support. We were left in no doubt that these students are being prioritised in the sector’s response.

I was heartened to hear about what felt like a step-change in relationships between students’ unions and university leadership teams. SUs have undoubtedly played an enormously positive role and have welcomed more collaborative working with university staff to the benefit of all. Underlining everything we heard was a story of immense hard work, sacrifice, and no little hardship as staff worked tirelessly to do their best for students during the pandemic. It is important to remember that we cannot do our best for students in these difficult times unless we also care for the staff who care for them.

I would like to place on record my sincere thanks to the UPP Foundation, and our partners Wonkhe, Group GTI, and Shakespeare Martineau, for their foresight in setting up the Student Futures Commission. I would also like to thank the wonderful commissioners who have given so freely of their time and expertise and to everyone who has provided their insights in person

or in writing. Our work so far has shown again how much the higher education sector is capable of when it has a shared endeavour.



WONKHE

SHAKESPEARE
MARTINEAU



Introduction

The UPP Foundation Student Futures Commission was set up to help the sector navigate through the next academic year, and beyond, as it recovers from the disruption of the pandemic. We hope that this work will enable the sector to get ahead of the curve, based on up to date evidence and analysis about what works and what students want.

The UK higher education sector is rightly proud of its autonomy and ability to lead itself, and so this interim report does not set out recommendations, but aims to collate the evidence we have seen so far on teaching and learning, student experience, and student mental health, where this relates to the start of term in September 2021. While the majority of the commission's work is looking into the medium and longer term future, we felt it was important to support the gathering of evidence from across the sector on some of these issues.

We hope that it also provides a starting point for the wider discussions which will need to take place.

Our main observations fall into three areas:

If the future for teaching and learning is digital, universities must sustain and improve their engagement with students and with the wider public.

1. Our evidence shows a consensus that some form of digital learning is here to stay. Despite much ink (real and digital) being spilt on the subject, nobody is calling for either of the extremes - teaching that is fully online or only in person.
2. This is made more difficult by the need to separate out what students want now, as we emerge from the pandemic, and what they might want in a year, or in five years' time. Effective and ongoing student engagement, communication and evaluation will be critical, and the sector should not be afraid of pooling lessons learned and best practice as it develops.
3. The sector is finding itself under intense pressure - from students, and via the media - to explain and justify its moves. For many outside higher education, online learning looks like a cost cutting measure, or one of a lazy unwillingness to go back to face to face and other 'harder' methods of teaching.
4. This is not a view that the Commission shares. It is clear from the evidence that many institutions genuinely believe blended learning has real potential, and that they wish to continue some of the progress they have made as a result of the pandemic for the benefit of students.

5. However, universities will need to prioritise work from September with students and with parents, including through the media, to understand expectations around what is variously called 'hybrid' or 'blended' learning, and to explain clearly exactly what students will receive, rather than simply broad framing and debates about terminology. Furthermore, universities would benefit from discussing openly the pedagogical benefits of their proposed models – not just the underpinning technological architecture. This is not a debate that the sector can duck.

Getting transition support right will be vital this year.

6. Amidst a second year of disruption to A-Level and Level 3 qualifications and exams, universities must ensure they quickly establish any curriculum gaps in students' knowledge. Incoming students will clearly have gaps in their learning, and they might not have caught up fully on their own during summer between finishing school- or college- based study and going to university.
7. It will be important to support students with these gaps – both because of the difficulty some will face in accessing undergraduate level content, but also before they have a knock-on impact on student confidence, retention, and mental health. Universities may wish to refocus on some forms of baseline assessment in the Autumn.
8. Students will not have experienced disruption to learning in a uniform way, and it is also likely that learning gaps are more problematic in some disciplines than others. So while there is limited benefit in a sector wide or even institution wide approach to catch up (unlike in the school sector), departments and faculties will need to establish the extent of learning loss and what that means for their own students' ability to access first year material in the form of contextualised transition plans.
9. For some students, missed content for their Level 3 qualifications will be less critical for their university studies than the maturing of their study skills which may have been held back during home and online learning. Universities may need to put extra resources into supporting students in self efficacy and study skills to ensure they can access the course curriculum successfully.
10. In addition, students that have spent less time in school have missed out on the usual intensive period of revision and consolidation that comes with end of year assessments. As well as potential gaps in knowledge, students will therefore need additional support to close these "preparedness gaps" in study skills, academic confidence and readiness for higher level learning.
11. Universities will need to build on and improve their student engagement to ensure the needs of different types of students are met, particularly for students with disabilities, commuter students, mature students, and those from disadvantaged backgrounds, and especially black and minority ethnic groups.

Students need support to help regain a sense of control over their university experience, and to rebuild their confidence.

12. Overwhelmingly, students reported lacking in confidence; they feel they are entering university with “fake grades” that might damage them in the future; they are unsure about the teaching on offer this year and about the threat of further periods of lockdown; they feel that they are below the standard they expected to be academically; and they have little confidence in the future employment market once they graduate.
13. The ongoing uncertainty as to what a university will look and feel like for students, both as a direct result of the pandemic and as a result of unclear or inconsistent advice from the Government, is contributing to the anxiety and unease felt by students. Institutions should be ready to help support students to regain control of their university experience, rebuild their confidence and make the most of their time at university.
14. This unease and uncertainty means that some students will struggle to re-engage with the student experience fully. They will need support to re-engage with extra-curricular activities, participation in which has declined significantly, and to build or rebuild friendships and connections with their peers. Engagement in extracurricular opportunities, and fostering a sense of belonging in the university community, are both well-evidenced ways to improve mental wellbeing, but also for student outcomes more broadly (engagement, academic outcomes and labour market outcomes). Both have been in short supply over the past two years, and will take concerted effort to rebuild.
15. There are also risks – both for individuals and for institutions – that many students will plan to go “twice as hard” when term restarts in September, particularly with much of the traditional student nightlife having been closed since March 2020. This presents a series of additional challenges for institutions to manage – the most serious of which is a likely increase in instances of substance or alcohol abuse, and a lack of opportunity to negotiate issues of consent and relationships pre-university. Supporting students to manage their personal finances will also be important.
16. All this means that students are going to be under a range of increased pressures this year. Mental health and wellbeing support has always been a vital part of student success; and universities should be ready for an increase in demand for these services once term re-starts in September.

Teaching and learning in higher education has changed dramatically – but can the sector keep up with this acceleration?

The evidence we've heard as part of the Student Futures Commission suggests that for many institutions, the shift to a new 'blended' model of teaching was accelerated rather than initiated by the circumstances of the pandemic. In our oral evidence session on the future of teaching and learning, we heard that many across the sector are keen to keep the momentum and progress going. Many institutions now plan to start the 2021/22 academic year with a mix of online provision, such as recorded lectures, supplementing the core in-person teaching in the form of lectures, classes, supervisions and seminars.

"If we don't do it now, then we're in danger of shifting back... I think there is a wave that we need to ride on"

Professor Danielle George, University of Manchester

We know students are prioritising a return to face-to-face teaching from September 2021. In a poll of over 2000 students run for the Commission by Group GTI, 59% of students ranked in-person teaching as their number one option. At the same time, only 15% don't want any online delivery next year. The most popular option for how courses should be structured next year was one in which teaching was mostly in person – with some online recorded or streamed provision once or twice a week.

Most institutions appear to be prioritising interactive, in person teaching for Autumn 2021. However, as recent media headlines have shown, the sector has a way to go to communicate the value of mixed-mode learning to the wider public. The media narrative has been particularly damaging for universities in recent weeks, aided by a clear steer from the Government and the regulator that teaching should – as much as possible – take place in person for the next academic year and beyond.

"Although immensely challenging, the pandemic has also brought about significant innovation and adjustment at rapid pace. The pandemic has compelled the sector to review curriculum design, course structure, assessment methods, and move rapidly to online delivery. The sector has questioned deeply ingrained beliefs about how education should be delivered."

[Written evidence from UUK]

The debate around the future of teaching and learning in higher education is not a new one. Even at the start of the pandemic, announcements that lectures were to be moved online for the next academic year were met with a significant degree of scepticism. Universities have had a legal and regulatory duty to outline plans for teaching in 2021 in advance for students, which given the uncertainty of the trajectory of the pandemic, has been hugely challenging. It is undoubtedly the case that a flexible, hybrid approach was needed for Autumn this year.

However, if universities want to maintain and sustain the blended teaching models they've developed throughout the pandemic into the longer term, the next challenge will be to communicate the value of this, not only to students but also to the wider public.

The evidence we've seen during the pandemic suggests there have been some real benefits to online teaching:

- Evidence submitted by the Disabled Students' Commission showed that many disabled students felt they had benefited from the increased flexibility in teaching models.
- Changes to assessments have been welcomed by students. At our teaching and learning oral evidence session, we heard early indications that there has been a reduction in attainment gaps, particularly for black and minority ethnic students.

Compared to their counterparts in the school sector, universities talk little about their pedagogical approaches, methods, and teaching delivery.

A new language to describe teaching has developed over the past two years – with terms such as blended, hybrid, flexible, and asynchronous/synchronous teaching all entering the mainstream. However, it's clear that this new vocabulary is not well understood and is used inconsistently. In many cases, we believe that these slogans are actively unhelpful in explaining what universities will deliver and the benefits of that offer. In contrast, the traditional model of in person teaching is already trusted, valued and well understood. The sector will need to bring people with it if it wants to change this default perception around what university teaching looks like. At the moment, there can be too much dependence on the broad terms – which are both unhelpfully vague and also have some disagreement over their precise meaning. Universities should be clear what they will deliver to students.

The sector has found itself most recently at the end of significant criticism from parents and students, through the media, over the value for money and effectiveness of online learning. This is not to say that it cannot be rectified, or that there have not been strong learning points, or that universities have not worked exceptionally hard to move rapidly to a blended model of learning when the pandemic took hold. But it illustrates the narrow ledge of public and political opinion and practice that universities are navigating their way along. It is positive that in recent weeks there has been greater discussion of this issue in sector press, pointing to the need to engage students and the public more effectively^[1].

“This is not about finding cheaper options. It is about finding the best way to support students with their learning and engaging staff in fast moving and exciting areas of pedagogic development”

Professor David Phoenix, LSBU

In the written evidence submitted, there was a shared concern that universities and senior leaders need to ensure they are collecting robust evidence on, and monitoring, their new teaching and learning models. This would ensure a robust body of data can be built on what works in a post pandemic context. This would also allow for best practice guidance to be developed in a more sustained – and sustainable – way than has been possible during the crisis period of the pandemic.

While this evidence base exists for schools^[2], there is currently no comparable evidence review on the effectiveness of remote teaching and learning for higher education. In particular, effective evaluation will help ensure that the needs of all student groups – not just those who fit the traditional definition of a student – are considered and that outcomes for future student cohorts are improved across the board.

The closure of schools and universities has significantly impacted student preparedness and confidence.

The sustained closure of schools over two periods during the pandemic – first in March 2020, and again in January 2021 – has severely disrupted the education of all young people. On top of this, many classes, and sometimes whole year groups, have been forced to isolate. It is well documented that students in disadvantaged groups have been more adversely affected throughout, despite many of them being eligible to remain in school throughout the pandemic.

As outlined eloquently for the commission by Rae Tooth, Chief Executive of Villiers Park, young people have shown immense resilience over the past 18 months. We know students have taken on additional caring responsibilities in their families, often juggling their own online teaching with home-schooling for younger siblings. The higher education sector has a responsibility to create the conditions that will allow these young people to thrive and develop as they take the next steps in their education – rather than to label them as a ‘lost generation’.

Through our evidence, we’ve identified two main areas of concern for the sector when considering the impact of school closures on future student cohorts.

1) The skills lost during the period of home-learning and as a result of the cancellation of formal exams.

All students starting university this year have had less time to develop study skills and practice exam techniques, as well as missing out on the usual intense period of revision at the end of their level 3 course. This is compounded by the variability in the level of preparedness between students from different backgrounds. Research from the Sutton Trust found that sixth form students from lower socio-economic backgrounds were twice as likely to not have had adequate access to a stable internet connection, devices and study spaces. The extended periods of school closure mean that students are likely less confident in their ‘university readiness’ – with those from already under-represented or disadvantaged backgrounds even further behind their more advantaged peers.

Many students have had their confidence additionally knocked by the awarding process for exam grades in the past few years. Research from The Student Room found students were concerned about the long term impact of teacher- or centre- assessed grades that can be perceived as ‘fake.’ Imposter syndrome, a lack of student confidence, and students feeling additional pressure to ‘prove’ themselves are all warning signs that we’ve seen through our evidence so far.

“Despite the fact that this student had been successfully placed on the course they wanted, they felt totally disconnected from what those grades were supposed to

represent. They didn't feel they were fair. They weren't the result of the exams our system has taught students are so important."

Mhairi Underwood, Head of Student Voice and Diversity, The Student Room.

Case Study: Aston University Get Ahead Programme

Aston University developed 'Get Ahead' for all new students in 2020–2021 and will be expanding the programme for first-year undergraduates in 2021–22. Get Ahead provides self-paced study materials and live classes focused on wellbeing and academic transition including maths, writing, study skills, and learning in higher education. Students can access the resources before they arrive at Aston and throughout their first year of study. The maths content includes a range of refresher resources that support students from GCSE level through to A Level. Specialist mathematics support will also be available to students studying relevant courses with peer mentoring and pre- and post-arrival teaching^[3].

2) Specific curriculum gaps

As Sir Kevan Collins, the former education recovery commissioner, has argued, the headline figures of high A-Level grades will mask inequality and missing knowledge^[4]. Incoming students this year will undoubtedly head to university with gaps in their education. For some students, this will be further compounded by their personal circumstances. This specific lack of subject knowledge will be particularly acute in STEM subjects, which rely more heavily on a pre-set amount of knowledge being acquired ahead of the start of the undergraduate syllabus.

*"These results don't represent a generation. Under the headlines of A*s and As we have a much bigger story about all children. There's that worry that people will think this cohort had it easy when the truth is they had a massively disrupted education"*

Sir Kevan Collins, former education recovery commissioner

In our evidence sessions so far, many institutions we've heard from said they felt confident that students could catch up on gaps in curriculum knowledge quickly once they started, and there is some evidence of specific summer and transition programmes to identify and address potential areas of weakness in new students. Whilst it is clear that these are issues that will need long term rather than short term solutions, the commission believes universities must ensure they quickly establish any gaps in students' knowledge. It seems reasonable to assume that some or even many incoming students will have gaps in their learning, and that

they might not have caught up fully on their own during summer between finishing school- or college- based study and going to university.

It will be important to support students with these gaps; both because of the difficulty some will face in accessing undergraduate level content, and also before they have a knock on impact on student confidence, retention, and mental health. The evidence suggests many students lack confidence in the grades they received during their A-Level or Level 3 study. Students starting university this term have sat no formal assessment for the past two years, meaning their benchmark for achievement will be based on their GCSE grades from summer 2019. As well as supporting institutions in planning curricula, baseline assessments might also go some way to helping students feel more confident about where they are academically at the start of term.

Case Study: University of Cambridge STEM Start Programme

The University of Cambridge has developed a STEM Start course to support students' preparedness for higher education. It reassures students and supports confidence building by revising school materials. Before the course starts, students are also provided with GCSE and A level revision materials via the Isaac Physics platform. The online course lasts for four weeks, with nine hours of learning per week^[5].

3. Getting transitions right has never been more important.

We know – and it’s clear that the rest of the sector knows – that transition support will be vital. This is not only the case for students starting this year, but also for returning second and third year students who will be less familiar with the university and for whom the university experience might finally be returning to normal for the first time. In our written evidence, students reported feeling disconnected from university life, and unprepared for the start of term.

“Students transitioning to university during the Covid-19 pandemic have had fewer opportunities to access the ‘hidden curriculum’ of higher education... the knowledge that is usually acquired in person before and during university, at applicant events, open days, and during the induction period, and often in informal settings amongst friends”

Written evidence from the Brilliant Club^[6]

In addition:

- Research from UCAS found that only 26% of this year’s home applicants and 44% of international applicants felt completely ready to start university.
- A poll of current Year 13 students on The Student Room forum found that 90% of respondents felt they needed more help getting ready for university^[7].
- 58% of students felt they had missed out as a result of not being able to attend face to face open days this year^[8].
- Through their evaluation work, TASO have found a significant drop in the uptake for some widening participation activities such as summer schools, which usually help students prepare for the transition to university. This will have a knock on impact on areas such as student retention, particularly for disadvantaged students.

“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 get a sense of, the layout of the city, the culture of the city.”

Professor Jane Robinson, Pro-Vice Chancellor Engagement and Place, University of Newcastle

Case Study: UCL Transition Mentor Programme

UCL has a long-running Transition Mentor programme. Every first-year undergraduate is matched to a Transition Mentor, a second- or third-year student from the same degree programme or department. Students meet their mentor once a week in groups of ten. Mentors help students to settle in, they can signpost to other university services, support with administrative tasks, and provide study skills guidance.^[9]

Research on behalf of the Commission from the Brilliant Club has strongly recommended universities consider a “long and skinny”^[10] induction period for all students this year, particularly those in the first and second year. Their research raised the importance of not overwhelming students during the induction period, and instead adapting induction delivery so that it is spread out over a longer period of time – and repeated where necessary. Where activities are held online or in a hybrid format, spaces will need to be carved out for peer to peer interactions to take place.

Case Study: Belong at Brighton

Belong at Brighton is a course centred induction framework developed by the University of Brighton. The programme is centred on courses of study to help foster connections to the students’ academic school, and covers students from the point of accepting an offer, providing a longitudinal transition to university during their first semester. The aim is to create communities of learning within courses and schools of study which empower and support students to succeed in their learning, even when students are working remotely.

Universities are well underway with their plans for induction for the 2021 academic year, and face the additional challenge of running induction activities for twice as many students this year – both for new students and for those returning to campus after one or even two disrupted years of study. While some students might struggle to engage or to re-engage with university life, there were also concerns raised that students will be eager to double down on missed opportunities, going “twice as hard” to throw themselves back into the student experience. Evidence from Neurosight^[11] found an overall increase in drug use when students returned for the new academic year in 2020, a scenario which is likely to repeat itself this September. Universities should expect a larger number of students taking or experimenting with drugs or alcohol next year, particularly as students will have had less exposure than normal to socialising in, for example, pubs or clubs. This might also increase the number of students with financial commitments they can’t meet.

“Students have missed out on so much over the last 18 months; 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. It’s a huge risk that I think institutions are going to have to manage going forward”

Dominic Smithies, Student Voice and Equality Lead, Student Minds

Getting the transition right in this first term will be a vital first step for ensuring student success this year. But it’s clear from the evidence that students will need additional support well beyond the 2021 academic year, as the long tailed impacts of the pandemic continue to be felt by new cohorts of students.



Concerns around student mental health and wellbeing were already front of mind for the sector – and the issues have been exacerbated by the pandemic

Student mental health issues compound, and are compounded by, many other aspects of students' lives, including their ability to engage effectively with their academic studies.

This was already a huge area of concern for the higher education sector and of course the pandemic has piled on additional pressure. This has also raised challenges for the student services they rely on for support:

- Research from UCAS found that in the last decade, the number of applicants disclosing that they have a mental health condition in their application has risen 450%^[12].
- The ONS reported that 63% of students indicated that their wellbeing and mental health had worsened since the start of the autumn 2020 term.^[13] This has impacted some student groups more than others – 80% of respondents to a survey run by the Disabled Students Commission^[14] reported a negative impact to their mental health as a result of the pandemic.
- The 2021 national student survey found that only 42% of students felt that their institutions had taken appropriate steps to support their mental wellbeing.

“In our view supporting student mental health and wellbeing needs to be a key focus for the new academic year and beyond”

Written evidence from the Office of the Independent Adjudicator

All this presents an enormous additional challenge to university student support services, students' unions, and university mental health teams. As a result, a whole university approach to student mental health and wellbeing is vital to getting the support right. While increased government funding for student hardship and mental health was welcomed during the pandemic, these are issues that will clearly need sustained and proactive work over the coming months and years.

One of the most positive findings for the commission so far is that student services, which have also had to adapt and move online as a result of the pandemic, are working well, allowing for more effective triaging of student support and signposting to services that are best suited for their needs. Students who might previously have waited until they were in 'crisis'

before reaching out for support in person have sometimes felt more comfortable accessing online services,

Rebuilding student confidence will take time; but clear communication about advice, support services, and consistency and clarity in communications and messaging will all be the vital first steps to get right from the beginning from September.



Getting this next term right for students, new and returning, has never been more important.

Students will need additional support to help them rebuild friendships, connections, and a sense of belonging on campus as well as their mental health, students are worried about their work-life balance, their motivation for study, and are struggling to make friends and meaningful connections after a year in the virtual world.

"A lot of students don't feel like the connections they made online, with people they never met in person, have much depth"

Dr Camille Kandiko Howson, Associate Professor of Education Imperial College

"I think students will be less resilient, less robust and less happy than we would expect them to be. And that can very easily amplify if they don't form peer groups very quickly."

Professor Sue Rigby, Vice Chancellor, Bath Spa University

In our Commission poll, we found that 85% of students surveyed had found it more difficult to make friends at university. Similarly, the University of Liverpool's research shows that 60 days into term, 33% of students reported they'd made few new friendships or connections. A recent report from Student Minds has also highlighted that two thirds of students have felt isolated or lonely since March 2020.

Investing in opportunities for students to meet and be together, especially for those who have previously missed out on such opportunities, and supporting rebuilding of infrastructure that supports this will be important for supporting student wellbeing more generally. As term restarts in autumn, universities will need to remember that over three quarters of students have struggled to maintain the friendships that they had been able to make. If lectures are still predominantly held online next year, universities will need to focus even more on the opportunities for students to meet with their course mates and peers face to face. The lack of a 'virtual corridor' for interacting between classes and sessions was an issue raised by witnesses in our second oral evidence session, as well as in a series of focus groups run by Students' Unions leaders across the country.

"Students feel like all the interactions they have with other students have to be manufactured. It's almost clinical, because you have to set up a zoom call or you have to arrange it beforehand. You can't just bump into people and meet them naturally. And this has been a huge burden on students, who feel like all their social interactions are almost inauthentic"

Danielle Bradford, Research Coordinator at Hertfordshire Students' Union

Case Study: University of Exeter Festival of Discovery

The Festival of Discovery emerged from a perceived need to provide students with opportunities for in-person interaction and connections with their peers and the university at the end of this academic year^[15]. The Festival programme comprised more than 400 events across all campuses, including a programme of academic activities intended to immerse students in experiential learning and skills development. Central to this was a programme of student society and club activities, including 'Give It A Go' initiatives.

This sense of loss was also felt by students in relation to their wider university experience. Our Commission poll found that more than half of all students also said that they haven't participated in any extracurricular activities, face-to-face or virtual, over the last year – and nearly 8 in 10 say this was less than they were expecting to do. Further research from the Sutton Trust found that 87% of students felt the pandemic had negatively impacted their opportunities to develop non-academic skills such as communication, motivation, resilience and leadership^[16]. The same report found a growing participation gap when it came to students taking part in extracurricular activities – with just 33% of students from working class backgrounds taking up extracurricular opportunities compared to 44% of middle class students.

"We've got a cohort of returning students that have spent most of their time learning in the pandemic, learning at home. They're probably feeling quite disenfranchised, and they're not feeling like this has been the experience that they signed up to get. We've got a long way to go to win those students back"

Hattie Tollerson, SU President, London South Bank University Students' Union



This decline in extracurricular participation represents a series of lost opportunities for students to develop further skills for the workplace. The Commission will be turning its attention to issues of employability and the student and graduate job market in the autumn, but we've already seen in our evidence a decline in confidence levels for students. In our commission poll only half of students surveyed were confident in the job market post-graduation. Student focus groups run by City Student Union reported a sense of growing anxiety that they had missed out on opportunities for part time work and in person work experience.

"Students told us they perceive the job market to be extremely competitive and currently bleak... a lack of access to opportunities was causing students to feel less confident about applying for jobs and how employable they considered themselves to be"

Ryan Ginger, Membership Insight Coordinator, City University of London Students' Union.

From the evidence to date, building back student confidence, wellbeing, and a sense of belonging will be a vital part of managing student retention and student success for the next academic year and beyond. A clear finding from our work is that students need support to regain a sense of control over their experience. Ongoing uncertainty is contributing heavily to the anxiety and unease felt by students, as well as the sense that they are constantly 'missing out' on opportunities, impacting their course engagement, motivation for study, and future employment. There are specific opportunities in this space for students who, regardless of the pandemic, have grappled with issues such as loneliness and difficulty accessing extracurricular activities – such as those with part time jobs, caring responsibilities or a disability. We will explore this issue further in the autumn.

Methodology

The UPP Foundation – a charity that aims to tackle the biggest issues facing the higher education sector across the UK – has established the Student Futures Commission in partnership with Shakespeare Martineau, Group GTI, and Wonkhe. In light of the disruption everyone has faced during the pandemic, it is looking at how universities can take action to support students from September 2021 to make the best of their remaining time at university and support those who are starting their journey in higher education this year.

The Commission will investigate and promote the actions that universities can take from September 2021 to support students to make the most of their remaining time at university and as well as those who are starting their journey in higher education this year.

The Commission has brought together a group from across the higher education sector, students and students' unions, experts from secondary education, graduate employment and representatives from the charity and voluntary sector.

UPPF Student Futures Commissioners

- Mary Curnock Cook CBE – Chair
- Richard Brabner – Director, UPP Foundation
- Professor Colin Bailey CBE – President and Principal, QMUL
- Mark Blythe – Founder and Chairman, Group GTI
- Anne-Marie Canning MBE – Chief Executive, The Brilliant Club
- Professor Juliet Foster – Dean of Education, IoPPN, KCL
- Professor Becky Francis – Chief Executive, EEF
- Hillary Gyebi-Ababio – Vice President HE, NUS
- Stephen Isherwood – Chief Executive, Institute of Student Employers
- Smita Jamdar – Partner and Head of Education, Shakespeare Martineau
- Alistair Jarvis – Chief Executive, Universities UK
- Dr Omar Khan – Director, TASO
- Nikita Khandwala – Strategy at LinkedIn and Co-Founder of Unbox



- Mark Leach – Founder, Editor in Chief and Chief Executive, Wonkhe
- Kate Owen – Chief Marketing Officer, UPP
- Meg Price – President, Worcester Students' Union
- Professor Lisa Roberts – Vice Chancellor, University of Exeter
- Professor Mary Stuart CBE – Vice Chancellor, University of Lincoln

The Commission has gathered evidence from the sector and students in a variety of ways over the summer.

Polling of students in higher education

We commissioned a poll which was sent out and responses gathered via Group GTI's Cibyl database of 1.5 million UK students from 140+ universities across all year groups, ethnicities, gender, sexuality and socio-economic profiles. Cibyl were used as a research partner, to support with research design, survey programming, responses collection and data processing. They surveyed 2,147 university students from across the UK between 14th-19th May.

Teaching and Learning Oral Evidence Session – 18th June

Session 1 – Transitions to Learning

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

Session 2 – Future of teaching and learning

- Dr Liz Marr – Pro Vice-Chancellor (Students), Open University
- Vicki Stott – Incoming Chief Executive, QAA
- Sam Sanders – Director & Advisory Lead for Higher Education, KPMG
- Professor Tansy Jessop – Pro-Vice Chancellor (Education), University of Bristol
- Professor Danielle George – Associate Vice President Blended and Flexible Learning, University of Manchester

Student Unions' Evidence Session - 29th June

Chaired by Meg Price, the session gave students' unions the opportunity to share the evidence they had gathered to inform the commission.

With thanks to: Dani Bradford, Hertfordshire SU; Lily Patrick, Leicester Students' Union; Ryan Ginger, City Students' Union; Rob Samuel, Student Voice Manager; Nick Glover, University of York SU.

Student Experience and Wellbeing - 9th July

Session 1 - Student support and wellbeing

- Dominic Smithies – Student Voice and Equality Lead, Student Minds
- Dr Camille Kandiko Howson- Associate Professor of Education, Imperial College London
- Jo Midgley – Registrar and Pro-Vice Chancellor, Student Experience, University of the West of England (UWE)
- Mhairi Underwood- Head of Student Voice and Diversity, The Student Room

Session 2 - 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



Transitions Roundtable – led by the Brilliant Club

Led by Hannah Thomson (Research & Evaluation Officer) & Julie Cummings (Public Affairs & Communications Officer) at the Brilliant Club, this roundtable explored further the question of how to facilitate the student transition to university post-Covid.

You can read the full report at

<https://thebrilliantclub.org/news/how-can-we-facilitate-the-student-transition-to-university-post-covid/>

With thanks to attendees:

- *Aimée Smith, PhD Candidate and Brilliant Club Tutor*
- *Anne-Marie Canning MBE, CEO, The Brilliant Club*
- *Dr Anton Machacek, Associate Director, Isaac Physics*
- *Becky Allen, Head of Transitions and Retention, University of Reading*
- *Billy Reed, Head of Student Experience, Engagement and Retention, SOAS*
- *Eireann Attridge, Programme Manager, The Elephant Group*
- *Jon Datta, Outreach Coordinator, Trinity College, University of Cambridge*
- *Maggie Gray, On Purpose Associate, Widening Participation Department, King's College London*
- *Meg Price, Student Futures Commissioner, UPP Foundation*

Student Focus Group – The Access Project

Chair of the Commission Mary Curnock Cook ran a focus group with Year 12 and Year 13 students who are part of the Access Project, a charity which supports students from disadvantaged backgrounds to access top universities.

Public call for written evidence

The Commission received written evidence from the following institutions, organisations and individuals through our public call for written evidence.

We received 40 submissions including evidence from 10 universities, 9 students' unions from a broad spectrum of institutions, and 20 sector organisations including the OIA, UUK, JISC and UCAS.

Our call for written evidence remains open throughout the Autumn: please email studentfuturescommission@publicfirst.co.uk if you would like to find out more and contribute.

Next steps for the Commission

We will hold our third and final oral evidence session, on the theme of employability, at the University of Birmingham in October, as well as continuing to commission and publish case studies via the Student Futures Commission website.

We intend to keep the conversation about student futures live, collaborative and continuing, and we will be sharing new insights and best practice through the commission as the term progresses. Our final report will be published in January 2022.

If you'd like to follow our progress, please sign up to the UPP Foundation newsletter via www.studentfuturescommission.org, where you can also read the numerous special interest blogs we have published over the course of our work.



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