



A Student Futures Manifesto

UPP Foundation
Student Futures Commission



WONKHE



#SHAKESPEARE
MARTINEAU

Table of Contents

03	Foreword
07	Executive Summary
11	Objectives and methodology
15	Part One: The Case for Student Futures
18	Our Call to action – A Student Futures Manifesto
25	Part Two: Anchoring themes for Student Success
79	Part Three: Areas for further inquiry
85	Conclusion



Foreword – Mary Curnock Cook CBE

The UPP Foundation conceived of the Student Futures Commission in early 2021 when it was clear that the issues affecting aspiring and current university students were not getting adequate attention. Students, their needs and their disappointments, were in danger of being ignored in the public debate about ‘catch up’.

The Commission, which it has been my honour to Chair, set out to correct this. We wanted to understand how the pandemic was affecting new and current students and to work with them and the higher education sector to identify what could be done to get students back on track for successful futures.

We quickly established a worrying baseline of low confidence. School leavers and current students alike were worried that they were behind in their academic progress, regardless of whether this was true. There was much anxiety about lost or rusty social skills. Following months of miserable isolation, students were worried about making and

maintaining friendships and fearful about professional interactions with academics and future employers. And even as the graduate job market started to bounce back, students’ confidence about finding a job after graduation was especially low, sometimes manifesting as increased demand for what became known as the ‘panic masters’.

This low confidence was particularly evident for students who were at a disadvantage because of their background, heritage, or because they were disabled. One of the biggest discoveries for universities during the pandemic was facing the reality of the complexity of students lives and backgrounds. It brought it to sharp relief the divides between those from more advantaged backgrounds, and those who, for example struggled to study alongside financial hardship; who struggled to access good home wifi or space to study; those struggling with their mental health; or those who had or needed to take on additional caring responsibilities.

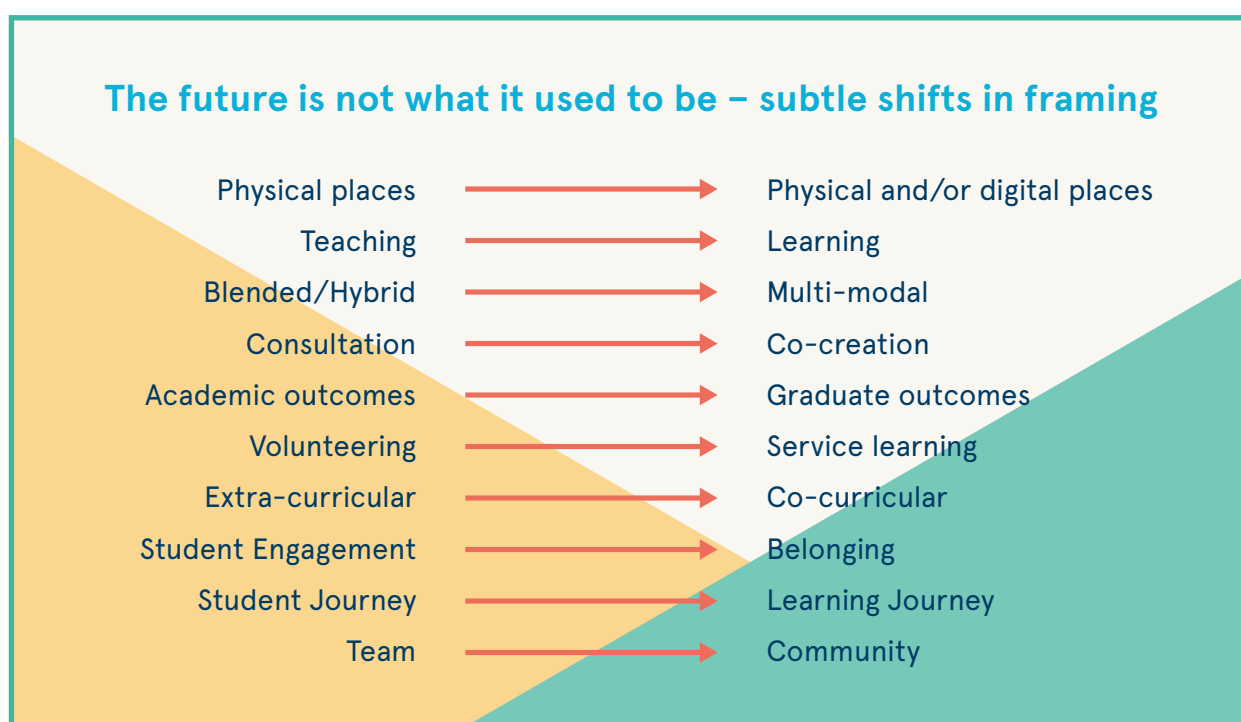
This report has tried to be as comprehensive as possible, but we know we've only scratched the surface of the additional barriers students from disadvantaged backgrounds will be up against in the future.

This was the backdrop to our evidence gathering, not its focus. During the evidence sessions, the many related conversations we had, and through the wide-ranging, expert and generous written contributions we received, we encouraged colleagues to focus on students' futures and how to secure the pathway back to success and confidence.

The report that follows does not attempt to reprise all the evidence and ideas that we discussed during the Commission's work – most of that can be accessed on the [Commission's website](#).

This report is a call to action for universities and students to co-produce a Student Futures Manifesto – a powerful statement of intent grounded on the themes and ideas that we identified, which reflect the individual missions of universities and their student cohorts.

We envisage that Student Futures Manifestos will embed the new spirit of collaboration and co-creation between students and universities that we heard about as a response to the immediate crisis of the pandemic. We hope it will also provide a useful framework to bring together much of the good work that is already going on in universities to surface and celebrate a renewed focus on the student experience. They are intended to support universities to communicate and to publicly champion specific commitments to their student's futures.



As the Commission has spoken to the sector, the debate on face to face teaching in the media and in public has been at odds with some of our findings. Effective digital approaches can augment and embed social interactions as well as teaching and learning. This is particularly important because those that are least likely to be able to engage with digital tools are those that might have most to gain from them. The reductive argument about online vs in person masks the real challenges of digital access and participation, and how new methods of mixed mode teaching and assessment might support groups of students who are often marginalised from the debate – including students with disabilities, mature students, students juggling second jobs or family responsibilities, and those who commute to campus.

We also noted the shift in emphasis from teaching towards learning and a matching interest in the learning journey for students. This new approach was evident on our visit to Queen Mary University, London where the relentless pursuit of excellence in the new mixed-mode education world was manifest in learning spaces which were equally accessible whether students were there in person or online.

Importantly, these and other excellent innovations that arose from the pandemic were facilitated by new approaches to collaboration with students. Students wanted to be talked to, not about.

But many went further than this with a deliberate shift from consulting students to a genuine and extremely fruitful co-creation and co-production model. It is exactly this shift that we think can be captured and extended through the proposed Student Futures Manifestos.

But we became acutely aware of just how much of a sea anchor legacy IT estates are to developing more student-centric digital services. Too much scarce resource is still being spent on running outmoded data architecture, out of support, and siloed systems with large expensive IT teams focussed more on running clunky outmoded systems than on the transformational tools that could change the dial for students. We've made a strong recommendation to address this. Amongst the hardship for students during the pandemic, the most searing disappointment for many was what seemed like rapidly diminishing prospects for meaningful and fulfilling graduate employment. After all, improved career prospects have now overtaken the love of the course subject as the primary reason to pursue higher education for many students. This shift for students also means a new primacy on graduate outcomes, although academic outcomes are still important but seen more as a means to an end rather than an end in themselves.

This does not need to be the bitter pill that many in the academy fear. We propose a changed conversation about the pathways to employability, articulating more clearly the transferable skills and attributes that are already present in the curriculum and which contribute to graduate employability. This together with more opportunities to bring extra-curricular activity into the curriculum, and especially through service learning (as being developed at King's College London), could rapidly improve students' slightly jaded attitudes towards careers services and employability support at university.

Our proposition for a Student Futures Manifesto is that they will, through their creation and enactment, channel the synergy between all these shifts in tone to rebuild the sense of community that has always characterised the best of higher education – the community of academics, professional staff and students in their local and civic context.

All through our work we witnessed a longing for belonging – amongst colleagues and students. By joining forces to express and deliver a Student Futures Manifesto, we hope to generate a powerful sense of belonging and agency for student futures. My hope is that universities and students will embrace these Manifestos as an expression of what universities are for and about,

and that the act of doing so will help rebuild the confidence that has been so painfully eroded during the pandemic.

In closing, I commend this report to you and thank my fellow Commissioners for their wholehearted commitment to this important work. I also want to acknowledge the inspired genesis of the Student Futures Commission by the UPP Foundation and Wonkhe, and the altruism of both Shakespeare Martineau and GroupGTI in supporting us. I am grateful for the work of Public First in supporting the functioning of the Commission and the production of this final report. And, of course, heartfelt thanks to the hundreds of students and colleagues across the sector who have engaged with the Commission's work and contacted me personally to support our work. It has been a rare privilege to witness such a generous and collaborative effort to help secure successful student futures after the pandemic.



Mary Curnock Cook
CBE

Executive Summary

This report focuses on the next steps for successful student futures and our core recommendation that universities work with students to develop a Student Futures Manifesto, built around six themes for success.

The Student Futures Commission was launched in May 2021 with three objectives:

1. To ensure students are best supported after the pandemic by contributing to a generous and collaborative effort in the sector to ensure their successful futures.
2. To make practical recommendations to universities, government and others for the academic year 2021-2022 and onwards.

3. To curate ideas, insights and learnings from all stakeholders in higher education that can be widely disseminated and used to enhance the post-pandemic student experience.

Without specific action, the next generation of students could leave education feeling further disenfranchised by their experience at university and with the education they receive.

Data from our weighted poll of 2094 university students and recent graduates, completed in October 2021¹, showed that:

- 73% of students reported that the pandemic had a very or somewhat negative impact on their mental health;
- 57% of students said the pandemic had a negative impact on the knowledge they needed to succeed on their course;
- 52% of students felt they were somewhat or much below where they personally expected to be in their academic studies;
- 90% of students said they strongly or somewhat prefer in person teaching where content is also recorded.

The Commission has focussed on three main themes in its analysis and evidence gathering: teaching and learning; student experience and wellbeing; and employability. Using this evidence, we have set out six themes that are at the heart of successful student futures, and which should be the collective priorities of the sector for the next five years. These are drawn from what the Commission has heard in oral evidence; in written submissions; from discussions with universities, students and third parties involved in higher education; and from the experience and expert opinion of our Commissioners. In this report we've outlined potential areas for development and shared case studies of the best practice we've heard.



**Support for students
before they reach university**



**An induction into university life
for each year of study**



**Support for mental health
and wellbeing**



**A clear outline of the teaching students will receive
and the necessary tools to access it**



**Activities inside and outside the curriculum
that build skills, networks and communities**



**A clear pathway towards
graduate outcomes**

¹ UPP Foundation / Cibyl (Group GTI) October 2021 Poll: http://upp-foundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/October-UPPF_Weighted.xlsx

We want to see higher education institutions work with students to develop, create and publish a series of actions and commitments to secure successful student futures. We are calling these **Student Futures Manifestos** – and they should set out the actions institutions will take over the next five years to ensure that all students can put the pandemic behind them and chart their path to a successful future.

A Student Futures Manifesto will act as a positive public statement of the commitments that the university is making to their students' futures – it will serve to provide focus to these activities and champion the positive actions being taken.

This is a chance to develop a core piece of work, produced by students and teams across the university, led by a member of senior leadership who reports directly to the Vice Chancellor, and with a clear sense of ownership by students. This is a tool for genuine collaboration with students which sits alongside the work universities are already doing to update their access and participation plans, and other strategic planning documents.

The UPP Foundation Student Futures Commission is therefore asking universities to:

1. Commit to co-create and publish a Student Futures Manifesto with students and students' unions by the end of the 2022/2023 academic year.
2. Commit a named member of the senior leadership team to be responsible for this manifesto, reporting directly to the Vice Chancellor, who focuses on institutional planning and strategy around the six principles.
3. Develop a communications strategy that helps explain and champion the work they are doing across all these areas to students, parents, the wider public, media and other stakeholders.

More broadly, there are areas of work that require further inquiry across the sector. We're therefore calling additionally for:

- 1. A new national technology infrastructure strategy:** we recommend that Jisc build upon their existing work and sector-wide leadership to provide further guidance which supports the sector rapidly to modernise their digital systems, architecture and applications. This should help universities accelerate the replacement of outdated legacy IT systems with a modern digital architecture that supports effective and expanding digital teaching, learning, assessment and core support services.
- 2. A commitment to a "what works" review of online teaching and assessment:** we recommend an independent nationally commissioned review is launched to establish effective online and mixed-mode pedagogy for UK higher education, which should lead to the development of a modern and up to date best practice guide for online and mixed-mode teaching, learning and assessment.

- 3. A targeted 'challenge fund' for well evidenced proposals to support student mental health & wellbeing:**

we recommend the Office for Students establish a new challenge fund which allows universities to bid, on a flexible basis, for their specific institution and student body needs to support mental health and wellbeing.

The ideas we have set out in this report will require a genuinely 'whole university' approach to student experience, wellbeing and learning. Taken together, we hope it sets a clearer path for successful student futures and for the higher education sector.

Objectives and methodology

The Commission was launched with three objectives:

1. To ensure students are best supported after the pandemic by contributing to a generous and collaborative effort in the sector to ensure their successful futures.
2. To make practical recommendations to universities, government and others for the academic year 2021-2022 and onwards.
3. To curate ideas, insights and lessons from all stakeholders in higher education that can be widely disseminated and used to enhance the post-pandemic student experience.

To deliver on these objectives, the UPP Foundation brought together Commissioners from a wide set of backgrounds, who have advised the Commission throughout as we considered the areas in which universities, both individually and collectively as a sector, can take action. We would like to put on record our immense gratitude to them for giving their time and expertise to the Commission's work, particularly during such a turbulent time.

UPP Foundation Student Futures Commissioners

- Chair: Mary Curnock Cook CBE
- Richard Brabner – Director, UPP Foundation & ESG
- 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 CBE – Pro Vice-Chancellor of Partnerships and Governance at University of London
- Dr Omar Khan – Director, TASO
- Nikita Khandwala – Head of Growth, Coleap
- Mark Leach – Founder, Editor in Chief and Chief Executive, Wonkhe
- Kate Owen – Chief Marketing Officer, UPP
- Meg Price – Development Consultant, NUS Charity and former President Worcester Students' Union
- Professor Lisa Roberts – Vice Chancellor, University of Exeter
- Professor Mary Stuart CBE – Emeritus Vice Chancellor University of Lincoln & Director of Leadership Development, Minerva UK

How we approached the work

As well as drawing on the extensive experience of our commissioners, we used a range of different tools to help us analyse existing evidence and draw new insights from the sector.

These were:

- Two comprehensive polls of UK students – in May 2021 and in October 2021, undertaken for the Commission by Cibyl, Group GTI's research platform.
- Three formal oral evidence sessions. These ran in a similar format to select committees to gather evidence. We questioned a total of 20 experts from across higher education, students' unions, business and the wider sector.
- An evidence session for five students' unions to share the findings of bespoke research they had undertaken with students for the Commission in the summer term of 2021.

- Three visits to university campuses at the start of the 2021 academic year, hosted by Queen Mary University London; The University of Birmingham; and Aston University. These visits also included roundtable sessions with University representatives and student services teams, and with invited experts.
- Sub-commission roundtable events on transitions, mental health, belonging, employability, and international students. These allowed for more wide-ranging discussion and debate than the formal evidence sessions.
- A focus group with six young people taking part in the Access Project programme, led by Mary Curnock Cook.
- A call for written evidence², to which we received 40 submissions from a range of higher education institutions, students' unions and sector bodies.
- A survey of Vice Chancellors ahead of the start of the 2021 academic year, inviting them to comment on the main focus for their institutional recovery, and their biggest concern about what might stand in the way of this. In this survey there was the opportunity for both on and off the record comment.

A copy of our polling questions, results and surveys, as well as other supplementary research documents, can be found in the appendix of this report.

To help structure our analysis and engagement with witnesses at our evidence sessions, we focussed on three core themes that we assessed most impact student futures:

- Teaching and Learning
- Student Experience and Wellbeing
- Employability

Our oral evidence sessions, which mapped onto these themes, were particularly central to developing the findings contained in this report.

The first looked at the future of teaching and learning in higher education. This focused on the role universities will play in ensuring future students have the knowledge and skills they need to succeed, and how the sector responds in the long term after the accelerated shift to digital teaching, learning and assessment that has taken place during the pandemic.

Our second session focused on the student experience, covering mental health and student wellbeing, as well as looking at how student engagement in universities and their wider communities can help support a sense of place and belonging. We took from this session that belonging – with an emphasis on social connections and lived experience – is crucial to understanding the overall student experience, and led to us looking for further evidence about whether students felt they belonged and what factors were involved in strengthening this feeling.

² <https://upp-foundation.org/student-futures-commission/submit-evidence-2/>

Our third session looked at employment, employability and skills. We were concerned to find in our May 2021 poll that only 50% of students said they currently had confidence in the job market³. Given that most or many students pursue their higher education studies in the hopes of building strong foundations for their future careers, and that workplace norms had also been severely disrupted during the pandemic, we were keen to understand how universities were responding to these challenges. A full list of contributors and evidence gathering can be found in the methodology appendix at the end of this report.

Throughout the Commission's work we have published our formal evidence alongside special topic blogs and thought leadership pieces contributed by colleagues across the sector⁴. We're grateful to all those who took the time to contribute to our work.

The Commission published its interim report, "Turbocharging the Future"⁵ in September, which focussed on our findings about what needed to be prioritised for the start of the 2021/22 academic year.

This set out the priorities for students return in the Autumn term of 2021. It focused on the need for improved engagement with students and the public on digital teaching; the importance of transition support; and the need to support students to regain a sense of control over their university experience.

Our aims for this final report.

We are using this final report to not only summarise the findings of our extensive evidence gathering, but also specifically to focus on the medium-term outcomes for students, and what needs to be put in place to ensure longer term stability and success. Where our interim report looked at what needs to be tackled this academic year, this report looks beyond at the themes underpinning a successful and sustainable HE sector which supports successful student futures.

³ UPP Foundation / Cibyl (Group GTI) May 2021 Poll. Available at: <https://upp-foundation.org/student-futures-commission/news/students-prioritise-a-return-to-face-to-face-teaching-from-september-2021/>

⁴ Available at: <https://upp-foundation.org/student-futures-commission/news/>

⁵ "Turbocharging the Future" Student Futures Commission Interim Report (September 2021): <https://upp-foundation.org/student-futures-commission/news/turbocharging-the-future/>

Part One: The Case for Student Futures

As helpfully summarised in a recent report from HEPI⁶, in many areas the impact of the pandemic on student futures and higher education has not been as stark as feared. Contrary to some expectations, application numbers grew and non-continuation (“drop out”) rates have remained at a low level. The graduate labour market is stronger than predicted, with the Institute of Student Employers⁷ survey showing that the number of graduate vacancies is now 20% higher than pre-pandemic.

However, these realities do not negate the low confidence that students feel about their academic achievement, their social and professional relationships and their prospects for meaningful graduate employment.

These low levels of confidence were not helped by the challenges for the student experience during the pandemic. The 2021 National Student Survey found that only 48% of students agreed with the statement *“I am content with the delivery of learning and teaching of my course during the Covid-19 pandemic”⁸*.

Overall student satisfaction dropped from 83% in 2020 to 75% in 2021 with specific issues raised about assessment, feedback, and academic support cited by students. We saw similar results in our own research: in a survey run for the Commission during October, 57% of students polled said the pandemic had had a negative impact on the knowledge they need to succeed on their course⁹.

⁶ HEPI: “Five common predictions that turned out to be wrong” 18th January 2022. Available at: <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2022/01/18/five-predictions-about-covid-and-education-that-turned-out-to-be-wrong/>

⁷ Institute for Student Employers Vacancy Survey 2022. Available at: <https://ise.org.uk/page/graduate-job-vacancies-20-higher-than-pre-pandemic>

⁸ Office for Students National Student Survey. Available at: <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/student-information-and-data/national-student-survey-nss/nss-data-provider-level/>

⁹ UPP Foundation / Grount GTI October 2021 Poll: http://upp-foundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/October-UPPF_Weighted.xlsx

There has also been a dramatic further decline in student mental health and wellbeing, which was already a major concern for the sector. In our October Commission poll, 73% of students said the pandemic had a somewhat or very negative impact on their mental health. Ongoing student insight surveys from the ONS indicate that students are significantly more anxious and more likely to say they are lonely than the general population in Britain¹⁰. They are also more likely to report worsening mental health. In November 2021, the average life satisfaction score for students was 6.7, lower than the overall population of adults at 7.1. Over 80% of respondents to a survey run by the Disabled Students Commission¹¹ reported a negative impact to their mental health as a result of the pandemic.

Tracking data from the ONS showed significant improvement in reported student wellbeing as students returned to campus in Autumn. But levels of student anxiety and loneliness still remain high. By November 2021, 46% of students reported that they “Often or always” or “some of the time” felt lonely on campus¹².

The university experience has always been about much more than the academic exchange of knowledge and the absence of this wider university life and experience has been keenly felt. These factors have accumulated to diminish the feeling of belonging that students experience during and after their studies.

The challenges ahead

Alongside the implications for current students, there is a wave of further challenges ahead for the sector. When we initially set up the Commission, we envisaged the publication of our final report would be with the end of the pandemic in clear sight. 2021/2022 has so far been characterised by further disruption for a third academic year for both school and university students.

While we can hope that the pandemic has peaked and is now diminishing, it is clear that the disruption it caused will continue to impact current and future generations of students and staff. It was not just the A level cohorts of 2020 and 2021 whose studies were disrupted.

¹⁰ <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/healthandwellbeing/datasets/coronavirusandhighereducationstudents>

¹¹ Evidence submitted by the Disabled Students Commission, available at: <https://docs.google.com/document/d/19i18tPqPMLsCejaTQntzDWNBQI4MTOTw/edit?usp=sharing&oid=103383222032451269348&rtpof=true&sd=true>

¹² ONS, Coronavirus and higher education students: England, 19 to 29 November 2021. Available at: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/healthandwellbeing/bulletins/coronavirusandhighereducationstudents1>

Year 13 students in 2022 will be taking their first series of public exams having missed out on GCSEs two years earlier. Students sitting their GCSEs in summer 2022 will not graduate from university until summer 2027 at the earliest. Universities will have several cohorts of students who have faced some level of disruption to their studies and consequent loss of learning. Each cohort will have been impacted differently, as will individual students within them. These factors could turn into real barriers to progression to and success in higher education, and particularly for potential students from disabled, disadvantaged or non-traditional backgrounds. And universities are under significant pressure from the government and regulators to increase quality and standards while resources remain constrained.

Many students have shown extraordinary resilience in the face of these challenges and there will be some positive effects from the increased level of independent learning that many have had to embrace and which will have developed useful skills for both higher level learning and future employment.

But the best efforts of the sector, some students will not have been able to enjoy as much success during their time at university as they had previously hoped. Disadvantaged students will now have even greater

challenges ahead to reach higher education at the same rates as their more advantaged peers.

UK universities are resilient and resourceful. We saw this during the pandemic when universities pulled off an extraordinary and largely successful move almost overnight to innovative digital modes of teaching, learning and assessment. Nevertheless, there is a narrow ledge of public and political opinion and practice that universities are navigating. Unless they can get on the front foot on these issues, higher education institutions will continue to find themselves on the receiving end of significant criticism over the value for money and effectiveness of online learning.

In summary, the Commission therefore sees the key challenges for successful student futures as being:

- Successive cohorts of students who are less prepared for higher education study, straining resources, student services, and teaching staff.
- Declining student mental health and wellbeing.
- The need to reverse the recent decline in student satisfaction.
- A loss of public trust in the higher education offering to students, including further questions raised about the value for money students receive from their tuition fees.

Our Call to action – A Student Futures Manifesto.

Having set out the challenges, our thoughts turned to solutions.

Two things were immediately clear:

1. **Solutions would need to be specific** – to the institution, and to its student population, in order to be successful. Throughout our evidence gathering, we were reminded that students are not a homogenous group and the need to treat students as individuals is keenly felt.
2. **But resources were stretched** – and two years of ongoing uncertainty left limited capacity, energy and budget for large structural changes.

Now is the moment to pause, reflect, discuss and set out shared commitments for student futures. This should bring together existing work, teams, initiatives and partnerships. It should involve students and students' unions to test and work through the challenges ahead. And it will, we hope, ensure energy is focused on activity that everyone in the university community agrees is working in the best interests of students.

With not for: Co-creating future student success

The overall aim of the Student Futures Commission was to take forward the lessons learnt during the pandemic. During our evidence gathering, the Commission has repeatedly heard from universities and students about the benefits of when they worked together during the pandemic, co-creating solutions and initiatives. Students felt empowered and engaged; university leadership teams found they were able to work more quickly when students were included

from the start. Some of the best outcomes of the pandemic were institutions, students' unions and students working together to tackle enormous challenges. Above all, it showed the value and necessity of listening to diverse student voices.

And at the same time, university leaders have admitted that they are struggling in a difficult and uncertain policy environment to mobilise their organisation for the challenges ahead for student recovery.



“Students need a sense of control.... it’s that sense of a lack of certainty, being told things are changing but not having much of a sense of ownership over their lives. But it’s hard to build that sense of control without student input into building and shaping what a new institutional community will look like.”

**Dr Camille Kandiko Howson– Associate Professor of Education,
Imperial College London**

This report is therefore a call for institutions to take the time to discuss with students what has changed, what can be built on, and how it can be made more manageable in the medium term. The manifesto can become a tool through which universities and students demonstrate action and leadership on student futures. It should help to initiate honest conversations about where more effort and focus is needed, what new approaches might be successful; and perhaps most importantly what activities need to be paused or halted to make space for a focus on the things which will have the greatest impact.

The Commission feels that the pandemic showed the value and necessity of listening to diverse student voices, and engaging students at every stage of the student lifecycle as active partners within the institutions. This is about more than the old adage of “meeting students where they are at”. It’s taking the time and initiative to meet students as equal partners in decision making and in co-creating solutions which benefit their future success.

“When university leaders are interested in and curious about the student experience and student leaders are interested in and try to understand the perspective of university leaders, better decision making emerges.”

Professor Lisa Roberts and Sunday Blake, University of Exeter¹³

More than ever, the public health emergency highlighted those initiatives and solutions co-created between students and university leaders were more likely to be effective and to attract support. We've seen a rise in town hall meetings, with students able to ask challenging questions to university leaders – often to great success. There's greater use of pulse surveys which help check if initiatives are working and if changes need to be made in real time. There's greater empathy and understanding on both sides of the institutional divide.

We are therefore proposing institutions work with their students to co-create a Student Futures Manifesto, co-signed by representatives from both parties. This would serve as a powerful statement of intent and

advocacy for successful student futures, and provides a meaningful framing for future action. This should be a jointly owned and meaningful expression of solidarity with students that, while recognising the harmful effects of the pandemic, focuses resolutely on future success and the things that will help ensure that success.

Co-creating a manifesto for the future with students is therefore a powerful way to take this partnership work forward.

These manifestos need to be more than a re-iteration of existing strategy. They should be developed collaboratively, co-signed by senior leaders and by student representatives, and should reflect the concerns and priorities of all parties within the institutions.

¹³ <https://wonkhe.com/blogs/is-partnership-possible-in-a-pandemic/>

Themes for Student Success

We wanted to provide a framework through which institutions and students could initiate and develop a Student Futures Manifesto. Through the work of the Commission, we've identified six themes to underpin successful student futures. The evidence supporting these are set out in the later chapters in this report.



**Support for students
before they reach university**



**An induction into university life
for each year of study**



**Support for mental health
and wellbeing**



**A clear outline of the teaching students will receive
and the necessary tools to access it**



**Activities inside and outside the curriculum
that build skills, networks and communities**



**A clear pathway towards
graduate outcomes**

The six themes should help students and universities create Student Futures Manifestos to anchor their work around the things our Commission has identified as necessary (but not sufficient) to ensure student success. Many universities already have well-established and mature approaches in these areas. The Manifesto is a place to bring these together to form a coherent narrative about successful student futures and one which students themselves have affinity with and ownership of.

A Student Futures Manifesto will act as a positive public statement of the commitments that the university (and student leaders) are making to their students' futures – it will serve to provide focus to these activities and champion the positive actions being taken.

Any high level solutions we propose in this report will vary in practice depending on the context of the institution. Such is the nature of a diverse, autonomous higher education system. We have therefore avoided proposing specific interventions

or activities. We see the role of the Commission and this report to encourage action and a focus on successful student futures after the pandemic and our proposals are deliberately non-prescriptive.

“Our students have very diverse lives and one size does not fit all; therefore the most important focus for us is ‘listening to our students’ voices’ and co-producing the future of their university experience together.”

Professor Helen Langton, Vice Chancellor University of Suffolk

A tool for organising and communicating ongoing activity

Student Futures Manifestos will become a public and visible channel of leadership, demonstrating a sector-wide commitment to and partnership with students in creating their futures. They can also serve as a tool for the sector to share best practice and action with a collective voice and mission.

While Student Futures Manifestos will inevitably echo themes already present in universities’ published strategies, the less formal format and voice of the Manifestos, coupled with the collaborative approach and student success focus, will be a vivid expression of a university’s approach which will resonate in a meaningful way with wider audiences.

We would therefore expect that an institutions manifesto:

- **Should be published and available to everyone.** While they might take the form of a published document,

we would equally welcome more creative approaches and the use of mixed media and channels to ensure wide engagement.

- **Sets out the specific and measurable commitments** that the university community makes together to ensure student success over the next five years.
- **Are regularly reviewed, refreshed and reported on.** We suggest that Student Futures champions from both university and student leadership teams take ownership of delivering the Manifesto commitments which are evaluated and refreshed at least annually. In the immediate term, Student Futures Manifestos should become the public face of pandemic recovery for the higher education sector and play a key role in lifting the confidence of aspiring and current students.

While work on Student Futures Manifestos should clearly aim to add value to the student experience and successful outcomes for students, we are conscious that colleagues in universities have themselves faced disruption and hardship during the pandemic. We want to avoid Student Futures Manifestos becoming a new burden on already hard-pressed staff.

Instead we see them as a positive approach to joining up much of the good work that is already going on into a coherent framework for delivering student success.

Summary

The Student Futures Commission recommends institutions work with their students to co-create a Student Futures Manifesto, co-signed by representatives from both parties. This would serve as a powerful statement of intent and advocacy for successful student futures, and provide a meaningful framing for future action. This should be a jointly owned and meaningful expression of solidarity with students that, while recognising the harmful effects of the pandemic, focuses resolutely on future success and the things that will help ensure that success.

We propose that:

- Universities and students make a public commitment to undertake this work.
- That the manifestos and the pledges within them will have the most impact if they are published by the start of the 2022/2023 academic year.

That the manifestos:

- Are published and available to everyone.
- Set out specific and measurable commitments that the university community will make Are regularly reviewed, refreshed and reported on.

Part Two: Anchoring themes for Student Success

Summary

Below we set out in more detail the six areas in which we want to encourage universities to engage with their students to create a manifesto. Where relevant, we've made some suggestions of the sorts of actions and activities institutions may want to consider as they review and create their Student Futures Manifesto.

To help with this, we've highlighted some of the best practice we have uncovered and offer some specific case studies. This section also builds on evidence we set out in our interim report, on the importance of reversing the decline in student confidence; of improving the communication of changing modes of pedagogical delivery; and of shifting the dial away from a universal approach to student engagement to one that better supports the needs of students as individuals.



1. Support for students before they reach university

“Lost learning is a concern – by which we mean the skills and practice of learning during the Covid disruption and the need for students to rebuild their self-confidence in engaging in the challenges of higher education.”

Vice-Chancellor, Russell Group University¹⁴

Between March 2020 and April 2021 alone, school pupils in the UK lost around a third of in-school learning time¹⁵ and this disruption has continued well into the 2021 academic year. It is the third academic year that school-aged pupils’ education will have been disrupted with a significant number of learning days lost due to absence or isolation. This has impacted school-aged students at all stages of their education.

It is well documented that even before the pandemic, disadvantaged pupils were already months behind their peers, from primary age onwards. The pandemic has inflicted a double-disadvantage on the poorest students,

potentially setting back years of progress in narrowing participation gaps. A 2021 study from Teach First found that 28% of teachers believe that the attainment gap has increased between pupils who had a digital device throughout the pandemic compared with those who didn’t, and just 2% of teachers in the most disadvantaged communities report that all pupils had adequate access to devices and internet¹⁶. Ongoing research from the Education Endowment Foundation highlights the mixed picture of emerging evidence on learning loss and the challenges in identifying which cohorts, in which regions, are most affected in which subjects¹⁷.

¹⁴ UPP Foundation Student Futures Commission Survey of University Vice Chancellors, September 2021: Comment given anonymously

¹⁵ Centre for Economic Performance: Learning Loss Since Lockdown (July 2021) available at: <https://cep.lse.ac.uk/pubs/download/cepcovid-19-023.pdf>

¹⁶ Data from Teach First via Teacher Tapp (9th December 2021). Available at: <https://www.teachfirst.org.uk/press-release/digital-access>

¹⁷ EEF Best evidence on impact of Covid-19 on pupil attainment. Available at: <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/guidance-for-teachers/covid-19-resources/best-evidence-on-impact-of-covid-19-on-pupil-attainment>

In the 2021 Ofsted Annual Report, Chief Inspector Amanda Spielman wrote:

"This was a difficult year to be young, and a challenging time to be learning. In all phases of education in 2020/21, most children and young people have learned less than they normally would have done. For many, the loss of education, disrupted routine and lack of physical and other activities led to physical and mental health problems. Loneliness, boredom and misery became endemic among the young."¹⁸

It is also clear that the rapid switch to online learning will not have suited all students, and particular detriment has been felt on their wellbeing and social development. A national poll for the Centre for Policy Studies¹⁹ found two thirds of parents and carers thought their children had been negatively affected by lockdown; half felt their child had fallen behind academically; and just under half said they thought their children's future prospects would be negatively affected.

We also know that some regions of the UK have been impacted more than others when it comes to the negative effects of Covid-19 on learning, and that some students are more at risk of not just failing to catch up, but also falling further behind. Initial research from the Education Policy Institute (EPI) and Renaissance learning for the DfE has found that²⁰:

- Despite a degree of recovery after schools reopened to all pupils in March 2021, pupils in England have still suffered substantial losses – particularly disadvantaged pupils and those in deprived areas.
- Disadvantaged pupils in secondary schools have been hardest hit, falling even further behind in their reading by the 2021 summer term, compared to where they were in the 2020 autumn term.
- There are substantial disparities in learning losses at a regional level, with those in parts of the north and the Midlands seeing greater losses than those in the south.
- Higher absence rates and significant digital learning inequalities, with both potentially rooted in socio-economic factors, likely play a role.

¹⁸ Annual Report of her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills (7th December 2021). Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/ofsted-annual-report-202021-education-childrens-services-and-skills/the-annual-report-of-her-majestys-chief-inspector-of-education-childrens-services-and-skills-202021>

¹⁹ Centre for Policy Studies: How Children Catch Up After Covid (3rd June 2021). Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1029841/Understanding_progress_in_the_2020-21_academic_year_Report_4_October2021.pdf

²⁰ Department for Education, Understanding Progress in the 2020/21 Academic Year (October 2021) Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1029841/Understanding_progress_in_the_2020-21_academic_year_Report_4_October2021.pdf

“When you look at what universities are doing to remediate learning gaps or skills gaps, or confidence gaps, as we come into study next year, it’s all fantastic. But it’s predicated on the assumption that most of these students are just a little bit behind. And a small amount of support for a small amount of time is sufficient. But actually that’s just a guess, as at the moment, we don’t know²¹.”

Professor Sue Rigby, Vice Chancellor, Bath Spa University

It goes without saying that these issues will impact future cohorts of students who will enter higher education. This provides impetus for a greater focus on supporting students before they reach university, to help mitigate the challenges caused by the pandemic.

Higher education institutions collectively spend £290million each year promoting fair access for students²². However, what is absent at present is a plan that explicitly sets out how universities will specifically monitor and tackle the disruption caused by the pandemic to the education of future student cohorts.

A vast amount of work and activity between schools, universities and other partners is already taking place in widening participation, public engagement and research teams across the sector. In future, this could helpfully increase focus on supporting pre-university students to build up confidence in their abilities. At its most ambitious, this work can build on the strong partnerships that already exist between universities and local schools, to support initiatives or research that directly help raise attainment and improve social skills.

“We piloted a pre-entry self assessment that was developed through our education division, in collaboration with academics, students, professional services, and people within the schools, to get people to think through at an individual level what support they thought they might need, so we can try and tailor the response.”

Professor David Phoenix, Vice Chancellor, London South Bank University²³

²¹ UPP Foundation Student Futures Commission: First Oral Evidence Session June 2021. Available at: <https://upp-foundation.org/student-futures-commission/news/the-pandemic-has-turbocharged-the-future/>

²² Office for Students, Comparison of outcomes achieved through access to money spent on access. Available at: <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/about/measures-of-our-success/participation-performance-measures/comparison-of-outcomes-achieved-through-access-to-money-spent-on-access/>

²³ UPP Foundation Student Futures Commission: First Oral Evidence Session June 2021. Available at: <https://upp-foundation.org/student-futures-commission/news/the-pandemic-has-turbocharged-the-future/>

Universities have significant expertise to share in this space, and there is an opportunity here to be part of a collective effort across the education sector, particularly working with schools. This could include direct work with schools to support attainment raising activity, exploring possible tutoring partnerships, and/or research into which initiatives most effectively tackle learning loss. It might be that the focus is subject specific, led by a Department or Faculty, to address an area of concern. We've seen some examples of this work developed already, particularly for STEM subjects²⁴ where a measurable amount of curriculum knowledge is needed before students start their undergraduate courses. Or it might be linked more to study skills which universities and students alike have identified as being impacted.

And we would encourage institutions to be ambitious in this area. If the next few years are about rebuilding the student community, then pre-arrival support is the first moment at which links can be forged. Part of the plan for recovery might include exploring stronger incentives to involve current students and recent graduates in tutoring or academic mentorship, either at a local level or through national programmes. Reforging the connections broken by the pandemic between cohorts of students will to an extent happen naturally. But there is an acknowledgement that putting in place the scaffolding to support this – with mentorship and tutoring being just one example – will be a key role universities will need to play. Later chapters of this report will also explore other avenues for this sort of work, including through service learning.

Case Study: Russell Group, Jump Start Programme

Jumpstart University provides free resources from The Open University curated with the Russell Group to support all students to prepare for and settle into their studies at university. The hub provides a range of online materials from OpenLearn, The Open University's free learning platform, which are aimed at helping students prepare for university with confidence.

It includes courses to help with study skills, wellbeing and mental health, and student life, as well as subject-specific courses. Users can search by topic or subject area to get access to the resources they need. This new hub will be used as an additional resource, alongside the welcome, induction and transition plans that have already been set up by Russell Group universities for their new students.

²⁴ University of Cambridge: StemStart Programme: <https://www.cam.ac.uk/news/more-than-900-a-level-students-will-join-stem-smart-widening-participation-programme>

We also believe there is substantial appetite to support the development of non-academic, social skills in advance of starting university. The range of pathways into higher education means that for some institutions, their area of focus is less about subject knowledge and more on ensuring students have

the skills they need for higher level study. And as we will touch on in later chapters, there is a need to include a focus on rebuilding pre-university student welfare and equipping students with the tools to rebuild their confidence – which we know many universities already excel at.

“There are some practical things that have been missing for young people over the last two years. Particularly, that’s around the development of study skills.”

Rae Tooth, CEO Villiers Park and Co-Chair of the Fair Access Coalition²⁵

In their manifesto, universities and students could therefore set out:

- The activity they plan to undertake to help support students, particularly from disadvantaged backgrounds, to access higher education, in light of the disruption we know the pandemic has caused. This could include activity that directly tackles the new and existing barriers that will hamper student preparedness to apply for and access higher education.
- A commitment about how they will monitor the impacts of the pandemic on learning in their future cohorts.
- A programme of resources to bridge the gap between school and university – helping students understand the knowledge they will need to access their course, including specific subject-based support and support to build the skills students need to develop before applying to university.
- Research or activity they will be undertaking earlier in the school to university journey, such as engaging with schools on early years reading and literacy gaps.
- A plan for baseline self-assessment on arrival, designed to help the universities and students gauge the preparedness for study of its new intake and identify where interventions might be helpful.

²⁵ UPP Foundation Student Futures Commission: First Oral Evidence Session June 2021. Available at: <https://upp-foundation.org/student-futures-commission/news/the-pandemic-has-turbocharged-the-future/>



2. An induction into university life for each year of study

“Institutions need to be running a year one and a year two freshers week this year for students... they need a full induction into the university and that opportunity to meet new people²⁶.”

**Dr Camille Kandiko-Howson, Associate Professor of Education,
Imperial College London**

Getting the right start in a student's higher education journey, and access to the right information and support, can make or break a student's experience at university. The first few weeks for students can be an overwhelming mix of administrative tasks and course or institution inductions, on top of the challenges often involved in moving to a new place, making new friends, signing up for extra-curricular activities and making sure you're at the right social events. Particularly for students who were most hit by the disruption caused by the pandemic – including students with disabilities, those from lower socio-economic groups, and mature students – this process has become even more challenging. Extending this approach for returning students

in their second and final years became a feature during the pandemic for students who had not been on campus during the previous year. The benefits of re-induction became apparent to many.

Research by the Brilliant Club on behalf of the Commission called this induction the “hidden curriculum” of higher education – the societal, educational, and institutional norms and rules related to university²⁷. This knowledge 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. All of these things have been disrupted or largely absent during the last 18 months.

²⁶ UPP Foundation Student Futures Commission: Student Experience and Wellbeing Oral Evidence Session. Available at: <https://upp-foundation.org/student-futures-commission/news/its-about-getting-this-cohort-involved-in-what-the-world-will-become/>

²⁷ Pownall, M., Harris, R., & Blundell-Birtill, P. (2021). Supporting students during the transition to university in COVID-19: 5 key considerations and recommendations. Available at: <https://psyarxiv.com/4fykt>

The Commission's view is that getting these transition points right – into university, and between year groups – is vital to securing students' future success. We have heard clearly from colleagues across the sector that we can no longer assume that students will come into university with the same level of readiness for higher education as they had previously. Activities and knowledge that might have been taken for granted may now need to be planned into an induction

period that seeks to integrate – or reintegrate – students into their university community, whether that's in person or virtually. And our evidence gathering indicates that a deliberate but flexible approach is needed, which provides time for both a breadth and depth of support, signposting, and community building, as well as the necessary administrative processes that accompany the start of term.

What makes a successful induction

A successful induction should

- Be an extended period that makes use of peer connection, gives students more time to join extra-curricular activities, mentoring schemes, and academic workshops, and meet their peers in informal contexts.
- Be 'long and skinny'. This means that they should provide the same information but over a longer period of time, which is especially important for virtual inductions as concentrating through a screen can prove difficult.
- Provide students with information to create confidence and to ensure a sense of belonging.
- Make use of peer support and mentoring which creates formal and informal spaces for incoming students to ask questions and discuss course content with existing students.

Student Futures Transitions Sub-Commission

Much of our thinking on this was set out in the Commission's interim report²⁸. But we feel that given the low base of confidence and the disruption students have experienced, a focus on transitions should be an important part of a university Student Futures Manifesto.

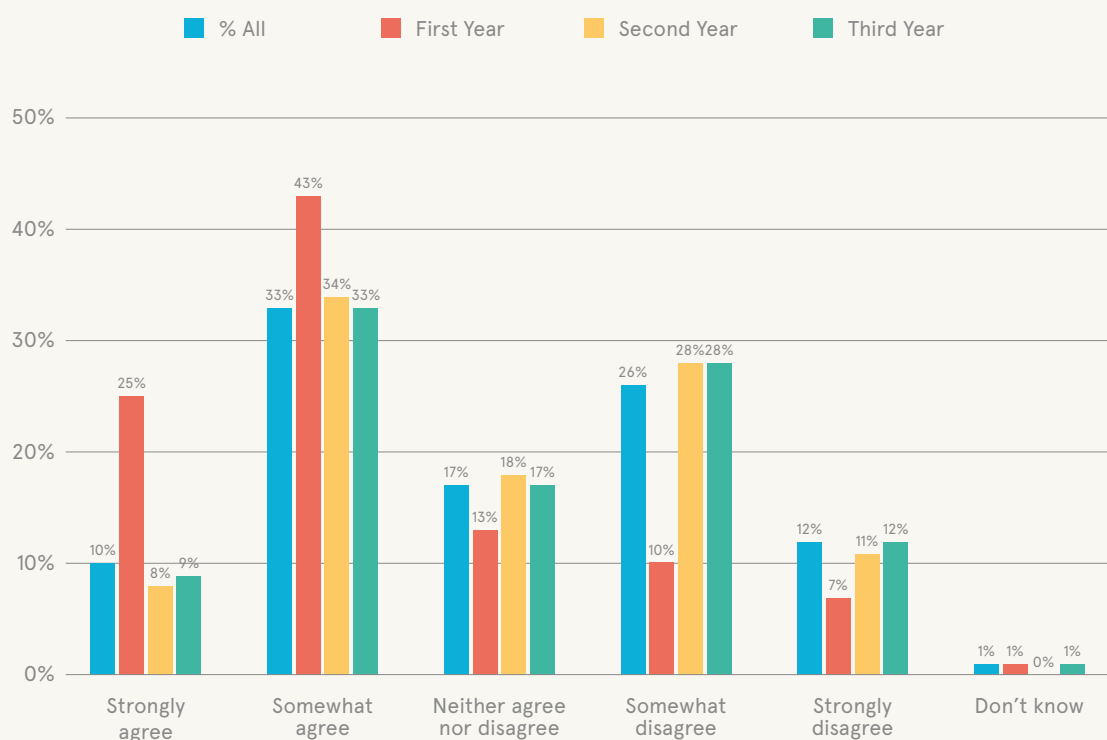
Written evidence submitted by UCAS corroborates this, with only 26% of applicants feeling "completely ready" for starting higher education²⁹. In the Commission's Autumn term poll, 68% of students in their first year agreed their university had given them all the support they needed to prepare for the start of term, but this dropped to 42% for students in their second or third year.

²⁸ "Turbocharging the Future" Student Futures Commission Interim Report (September 2021): <https://upp-foundation.org/student-futures-commission/news/turbocharging-the-future/>

²⁹ Written Evidence from UCAS (May 2021). Available at: <https://wwwucas.com/file/520121/download?token=GAihJWTW>

Table 1: University Support

To what extent do you agree with the following state:
 “My university has given me all the support I need to prepare for the start of term?”



Source: UPP Foundation / Cibyl (Group GTI) Poll October 2021

We know many institutions already anticipated this. In our oral evidence sessions, we heard about universities preparing to run 'Freshers' activities for multiple cohorts of students, not just new starters. And many of these were scheduled to run over a longer period, both to help with capacity and possible social distancing, but also recognising that it would take more time than usual to help students feel prepared for the new university term.

The data above already indicates that students in the second and third year of study are less likely to feel they have the support they need. And in our polling, 57% of students agreed that the induction period should be extended for new students, and 67% agreed that students who are not in the first year would benefit from similar inductions when returning to university. This will also be important for universities accepting students from Level 4 and Level 5 study into second and third years of a course.

Case Study: Loughborough University, Online Portal

In 2018 Loughborough University reviewed their application processes and support for disabled students. As part of this they created an online Portal. All applicants are directed to the Portal. The Portal allows students to describe in their own words the difficulties they have had, think about how this may impact their study and wellbeing and through partnership with them, helping the university to plan for the transition in advance of them arriving. Information is transferred to a 'live' system allowing academic schools and services to be aware of students' requirements in advance so they can start preparing for their arrival. Ninety-five standardised adjustments can be used to proactively plan support. Students can view their approved adjustments on their self-service records. This transparency helps ensure the student has greater control over their support and can review it at various stages of their study journey.



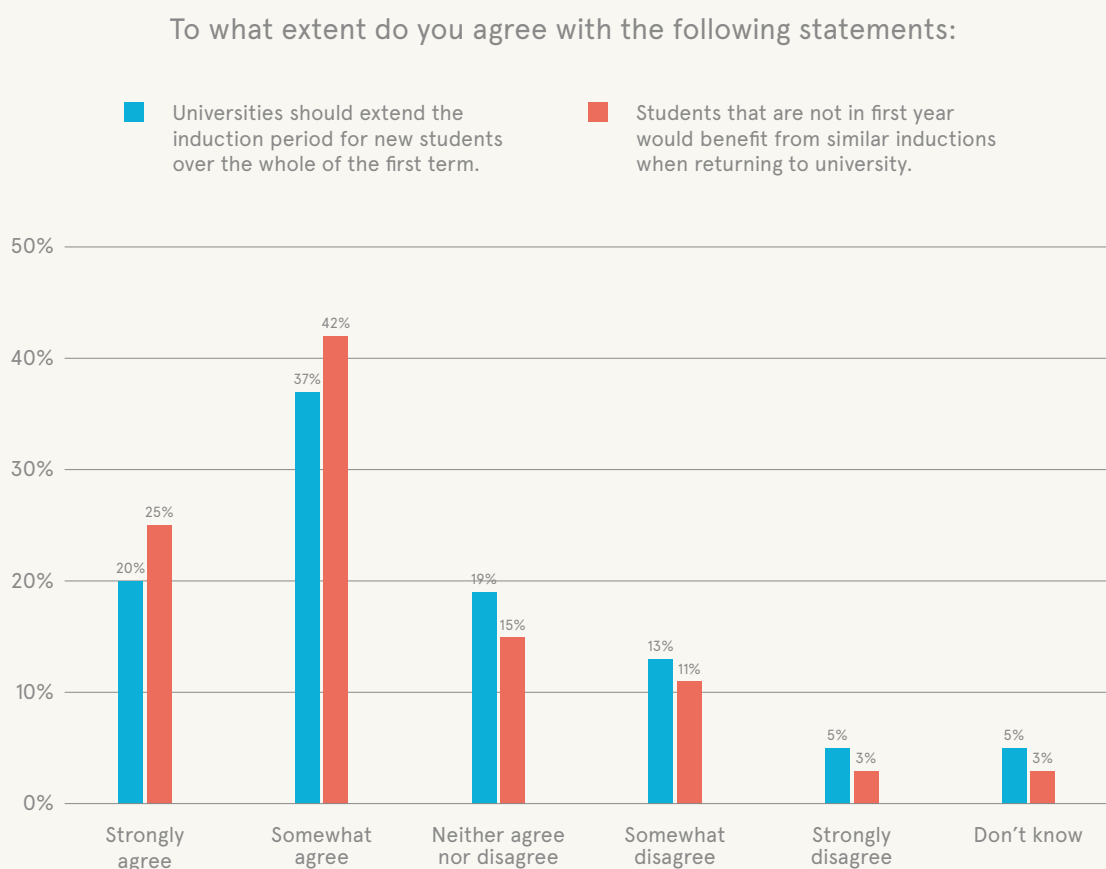
Students from Loughborough University supported by the online Portal

Case Study: DeMontfort University, Base Camp

Study at DMU begins with a transition learning package called 'Base Camp'. The university reaches out to all students following clearing with an induction package, a self-assessment skill exercise and other information about student life – this has an 80% response rate for all incoming students and forms the first contact for transition. Contact is maintained to continue to support transition, to arrival and beyond.

DMU make contact with all new students and returning students to make use of this resource throughout the summer, on arrival and return, and throughout their studies. It allows for on demand use to locate and resolve particular learning needs, as an induction resource but also as a longer, thinner induction module. The aim is also for it to include reusable and 'biteable' content to be embedded in modules at relevant, timely points in the curriculum, or as a reference resource by students at any time. That way, students at any juncture can monitor progress or just jump in at any point.

Table 2: Induction Periods



Source: UPP Foundation / Cibyl (Group GTI) Poll October 2021

The Commission strongly welcomes and supports the collaborative efforts of schools, universities and access charities to develop new programmes for a more comprehensive induction

and progression offer which starts around the time a university accepts an application onto the course, and concludes half way into their first year.

Case Study: The Brilliant Club, Join the Dots Programme

The Brilliant Club's Join the Dots programme, developed in collaboration with the Reach Foundation and the London Academy of Excellence, is a national initiative built on the principles of connections, community, and coaching. The aim is to develop a network of school and university support for students during the transition into the first year of university.

The first pilot will launch in summer 2022. Students will be matched with a PhD Coach from the university they are going to. Each PhD Coach will support eight students through the six-month transition programme.

Join the Dots will connect schools, universities and students to share knowledge and set goals for a successful transition. It will build communities of students to identify, discuss and address shared challenges and foster a sense of belonging at university. Through 1-1 and peer group coaching, it will help students develop key university study strategies and be a link for students to access university support as needed.

And from research undertaken by our international students sub-commission, led by Professor Mary Stuart, we know that international students in particular report significant anxiety about their pre-arrival

experience. In its report, published on the 31st January³⁰, they highlighted how making communications more responsive and where possible more personal and tailored, could all help to alleviate this.

“For me the most stressful thing was the application process itself, it took a long time to receive an unconditional letter, there was also much paperwork. I still didn’t know if I made the right choice.”

Focus Group Participant, International Student Futures Report³¹

³⁰ UPP Foundation Student Futures Commission: International Student Futures Report. Available at: <https://upp-foundation.org/student-futures-commission/news/international-student-futures-report/>

³¹ UPP Foundation Student Futures Commission: International Student Futures Report. Available at: <https://upp-foundation.org/student-futures-commission/news/international-student-futures-report/>

Transitions into university are more than a series of administrative tasks; they are the point at which institutions first have the opportunity to bring students into the university community, building a sense of belonging and connections. It's where students first start to map

out the networks of support, both formally and informally, that will help them to succeed during their studies. The Commission feels there are opportunities for institutions to rethink how this community building can be better integrated into the transition process.

Case Study: Nottingham Trent University, STEPS programme

NTU's Student Transition and Engagement Programme (STEPS) empowers students to navigate all stages of their university career. Designed with students, STEPS develops the knowledge, skills and behaviours students want and need to succeed in their journey into and through NTU.

Pre-arrival, all new students receive a peer-led welcome telephone call and are directed to an online induction module. This assists students in navigating relevant aspects of university life; it introduces the concept of active citizenship and signposts to relevant services and support and encourages early engagement with NTU Welcome activities. Course induction contains compulsory workshops which facilitate belonging, build community and instil agency.



Nottingham Trent University student offering campus tour as part of their STEPS programme

Transition support continues throughout the course and includes peer mentors and goal-setting sessions.

Under-represented groups receive additional support such as summer schools and leadership programmes and a specialist service contacts those students whose engagement is dipping. There is an adapted, stage-specific programme for returning and PG students.

Case Study: University of Portsmouth, Being, Belonging, Becoming

Meehan and Howells (2018 & 2019) evaluated first-year students' transition into university and found that the values of 'being, belonging and becoming' were particularly important. Specifically, three things matter to students: the academic staff they work with; the nature of their academic study; and the feeling of belonging. Understanding that these were more important when teaching was provided in a blended format, the University of Portsmouth Portsmouth developed a 'Blended and Connected' approach, a mix of online synchronous and asynchronous, and face-to-face learning, which included that all important 'Connected' in the name and ethos of our approach. The approach is research-based, and also modelled on an evidence-based, data-driven approach in which the student voice is absolutely central. Through this evidence, the University of Portsmouth sought to understand their students, what their experience is, in order to create an experience to support their aspirations and embed being, belonging, becoming (BBB) into their education and experience in 2020 and 2021. This work will be further developed via a QAA funded collaborative enhancement project.³²



At Portsmouth we plan to combine these instruments in the future.

³² Differing perceptions of quality of learning' during the pandemic by ethnicity (Dunbar-Morris et al, 2021 & <https://sites.google.com/port.ac.uk/qaa-bame-enhancementproject/survey-tool>).

Case Study: University College London, Pre-university support

Pre-university support (filling knowledge and skills gaps before entry to HE)

Building on the findings of their Student Experience Transformation programme UCL felt it was important to make sure their new students were fully prepared and well advised about what university life was going to be like as we emerged from the pandemic and that they were reassured that their aspiration to make new friends and build networks could still be realised. They spoke to hundreds of students and they helped us understand what mattered to them and what could be presented in different ways at different times.

Using all their platforms, UCL created a seamless and connected set of communications, webinars, online events and on campus activities to help students navigate their arrival, make new friends and get to know their departments. Despite all challenges of the pandemic, our surveys of student experience showed double-digit improvements in satisfaction, in particular +21% for social events and +17% for advance information.

In their Student Futures Manifesto, universities and students could therefore set out:

- A plan for how they will rethink the transition process at the start of each year of study, working with current students and staff to understand what worked well and what could be improved, and with students' unions and other partners involved in traditional welcome or freshers week activities.
- A plan to rethink the systems or user design of introduction modules to ensure students are able to have access to all the information they need without being overwhelmed.
- How they will tailor transition and reintegration support for specific cohorts of students who might be in particular need of additional help, such as those with disabilities or with caring responsibilities, or those starting their studies in second or final years.



3. Support for mental health and wellbeing

“Students have experienced a uniquely difficult combination of challenges during the pandemic, which may have included financial hardship, poor physical health, family disruption and social isolation, all of which will have contributed to concerning levels of poor mental health. Universities will need to work hard to re-establish their in-person communities and create a sense of belonging for both staff and students and build the resilience needed.”

Professor David Richardson, Vice Chancellor, University of East Anglia

Student mental health and wellbeing is an issue that was already a major concern for the sector, and the Commission felt it could not be absent from a report on students’ future success. That said, we are mindful that there is much ongoing work in this area, such as UUK’s Stepchange: mentally health universities framework, a strategic framework for a whole university approach to mental health and wellbeing³³.

We strongly support the best practice set out in the University Mental Health Charter led by Student Minds and funded by the UPP Foundation³⁴, and the ongoing work to encourage institutions to adopt a whole university approach to mental health. This section of the report sets out the evidence we have heard and outlines the three specific areas where we think universities can make further, meaningful improvements for student wellbeing and student mental health support.

³³ UUK: Stepchange: mentally health universities (October 2021). Available at: <https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/what-we-do/policy-and-research/publications/stepchange-mentally-healthy-universities>

³⁴ <https://universitymentalhealthcharter.org.uk/>

These areas are informed by the discussion we held as part of our wider mental health sub-commission, led by Professor Juliet Foster, Dean of Education at the Institute of Psychiatry, Psychology and Neuroscience at King's College London. These improvements are to:

1. Use the innovations and new ways of working developed during the pandemic to make student services more accessible.
2. Help build a community and sense of belonging to tackle the impact of loneliness and isolation on wellbeing.
3. As far as possible, ensure students have a named pastoral contact they can reach out to for support.

This chapter will focus on the support which needs to be available for students who wish to raise and get support for a mental health concern. A later section will focus on how building back a sense of belonging can help tackle the wider issue of declining student wellbeing.

The decline in student wellbeing

The pandemic has caused a notable decrease in reported student wellbeing. Increased feelings of loneliness and a lack of confidence,

declining student wellbeing and long waiting times for mental health support are problems which predate the pandemic but have been exacerbated by it. And it is still too early to know the longer-term impact that the pandemic will have on current and future students' mental health.

We do not want to downplay the seriousness of this issue affecting all young people. A study from Young Minds found 80% of young people with a history of mental health problems agreed that the pandemic made their mental health worse³⁵. A recent report from the Coalition for Young Mental Health in Schools reported that 62% of young people surveyed reported feeling anxious or worried more frequently than pre-pandemic; and 45% of young people rated their mental health as good compared to 72% who rated their physical health as good³⁶. HEPI's 2021 Student Academic Experience Survey found mental health concerns were by far the most common reasons students had considered leaving their course³⁷.

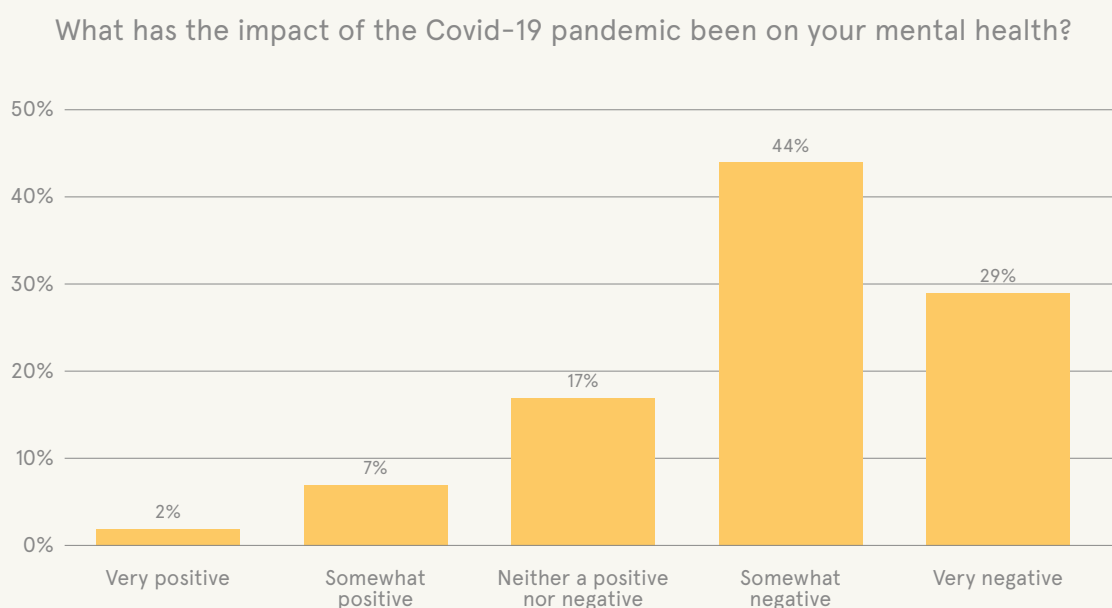
Similarly, our Autumn 2021 polling found 73% of students reported the pandemic had a very or somewhat negative impact on their mental health.

³⁵ Young Minds: Coronavirus and Impact on Young People with Mental Health Needs (Summer 2020). Available at: <https://www.youngminds.org.uk/media/355gyqcd/coronavirus-report-summer-2020-final.pdf>

³⁶ Coalition for Youth Mental Health in Schools: Fixing a Failing Systems (November 2021). Available at: <https://www.publicfirst.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/MHC-Report.pdf>

³⁷ HEPI/Advance HE: Student Academic Experience Survey 2021. Available at: https://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/SAES_2021_FINAL.pdf

Table 3: Impact of the pandemic on student mental health



Source: *UPP Foundation / Cibyl (Group GTI) Poll October 2021*

Other surveys have found similar or worse findings for students. The ONS has consistently found that, during Covid, students were more likely to report lower average life satisfaction scores than the rest of the adult population³⁸. 80% of respondents to a survey run by the Disabled Students Commission reported a negative impact to their mental health as a result of the pandemic³⁹. This is not surprising, and the pandemic has inevitably been a time of great uncertainty and anxiety for young people – as well as

others. While this might be seen as an expected response to an abnormal situation, this does not make it any more manageable for those who are experiencing it.

We also know that the cause and solutions to many of these issues sit out of the control of most universities. It requires longer term funding and investment in youth mental health services; more support in schools; and better and more timely access to NHS mental health services. However, there are things within the sector's control that can help.

³⁸ ONS, Coronavirus and higher education students: England (19th February – 1st March 2021) Available at: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/healthandwellbeing/bulletins/coronavirusandhighereducationstudents/19februaryto1march2021#main-points>

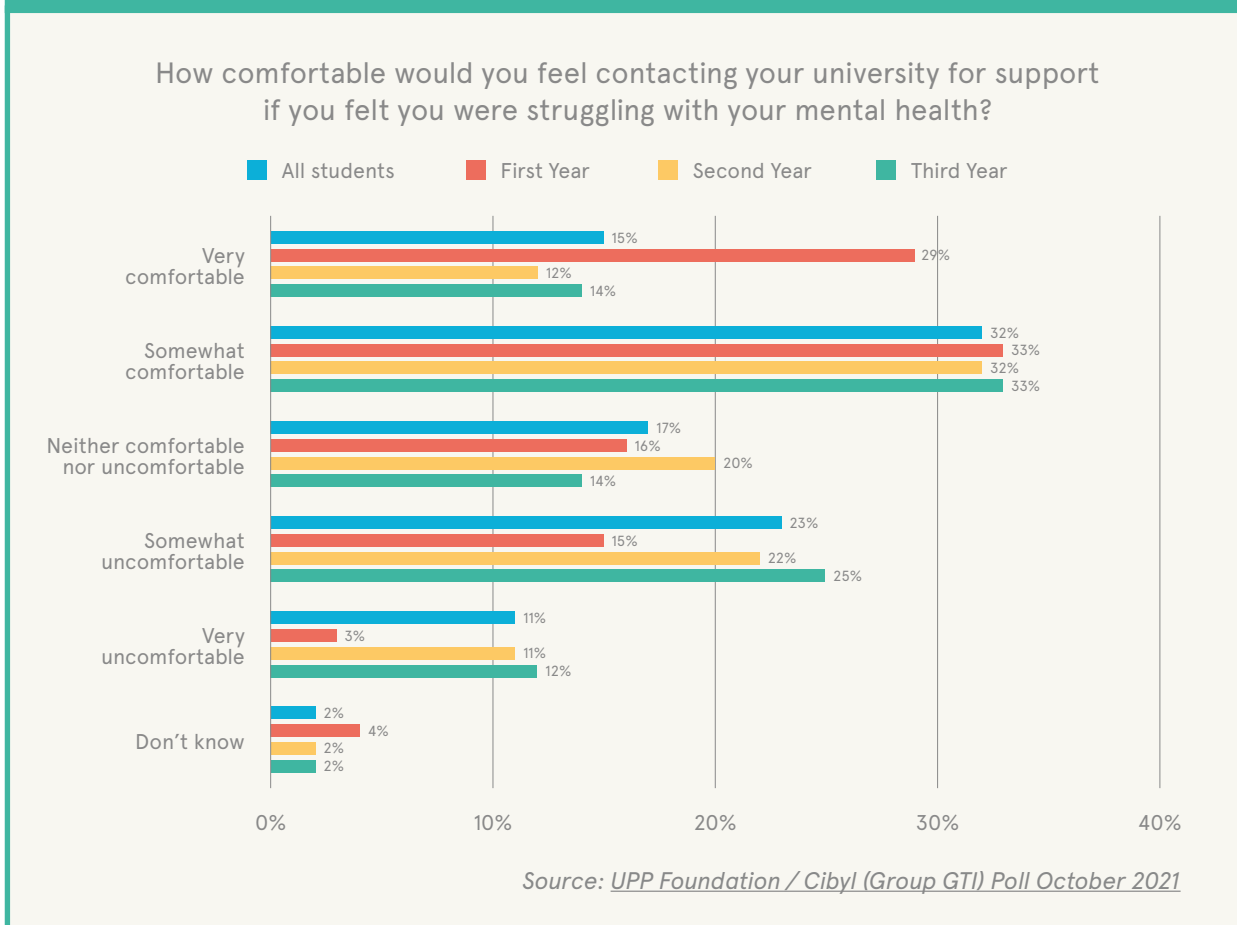
³⁹ Written evidence from the Disabled Students' Commission: <https://docs.google.com/document/d/19i18tPqPMLsCejaTQntzDWNBQI4MTOTw/edit?usp=sharing&oid=103383222032451269348&rtpof=true&sd=true>

Accessing timely and appropriate mental health support, and feeling comfortable raising issues around mental health and wellbeing

We believe that for students to have successful higher education experiences, it is vital they know who to contact for support if they have an issue outside an immediate academic concern. It is also important that they know what services are available to support them further. We welcome the fact that many universities already invest huge amounts of time and resources into this within their institution.

Our Autumn 2021 poll showed that students were more likely to be comfortable than uncomfortable in contacting their university for support if they were struggling with their mental health, but this declined significantly for students in their second or third year. 62% of first year students said they would contact their university compared to 44% and 47% of second and third-year students respectively. There was a parallel increase in students reporting that they would be somewhat or very uncomfortable, rising from only 18% in the first year to 33% and 37% in the second and third.

Table 4: How comfortable would you feel contacting your university for support with your mental health



The 35% of students who feel uncomfortable contacting universities for support suggests that many students may not even be reaching out, despite mental health services already being stretched by current demand. This demonstrates the scale of the challenge facing universities.

We heard of similar hesitance to disclose or reach out for support in our written evidence. Data from UCAS estimates 50% of students currently don't disclose mental

health issues to their university or college; and many used the free text response to say they regretted not sharing a mental health condition sooner⁴⁰. A study of students from widening participation backgrounds submitted by academics from Durham University found these students had particularly limited engagement with formal support services, seeing the formal structures of the University as "closed" and preferring to solve problems on their own or through peer support networks⁴¹.

⁴⁰ Written evidence provided by UCAS, available at: <https://www.ucas.com/file/520121/download?token=GAihJWTW>

⁴¹ Written Evidence from Raaper & Brown, available at: <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1rsdwmYezWKbAjLyzE2nIlyqd6ByS1b0m/view?usp=sharing>

Against a background of continued, though potentially improving, social stigma around mental health problems, universities should work closely with students to support them in feeling able to disclose when they are struggling with their mental health, and ensuring they have timely access to appropriate support services as a result of this disclosure. Within this, universities may wish to tailor aspects of their support to different student demographics, depending on their varying needs.

An interesting finding in our evidence was that moving some student services online has meant student concerns can be better triaged and students quickly directed towards the support that best suits their circumstance. It has allowed processes to be streamlined and helped students to come forward with difficulties before they reach a point of crisis – and crucially then to be guided through the system rather than left to tackle this themselves. This more personalised and proactive approach should be fully embraced. It is also important that this support is available in a timely manner; there is no sense having effective triage processes if students are simply being added to lengthy waiting lists.

Case Study: Teesside University, Student Life Centre

In January 2020, TU opened its award-winning Student Life centre, offering a technology-enabled environment to support diverse learner needs, and providing a range of social and individual learning spaces. Part of a wider project reimagining the University's approach to Student Life, the idea was that all student-facing services would be brought together under one roof so students have access to a single point of contact for advice, guidance and wellbeing support.

As it has not been possible to do this physically during the pandemic, TU's approach to Student Life has been delivered virtually instead. This ensured students continued to have access to the support they need to help them succeed, including wellbeing services.

Actions have focussed on removing barriers that might prevent students from continuing their studies including: a simplified process for accessing Hardship Fund, specific information to support disabled students to access online learning, remote appointments (including priority appointments for students in crisis) and direct support for students who are experiencing mental health problems.

Case Study: University of York, Support for Independent Students

During the pandemic, the University of York offered weekly online drop-in sessions and regular online social events for care experienced and estranged students, which it identified as a group in particular need of additional support. Weekly 'keeping in touch' emails were sent to encourage continued communication and engagement.

It was decided that following the easing of restrictions and the emphasis on in-person teaching that these be replaced with regular in person coffee drops ins and social events. Social events remain a mix of online and in person to offer the opportunity for all students to get involved. All students can access a 1-2-1 appointment either in-person or remotely.

Regular events are held in partnership with the University of York Careers and Placements team which are tailored specifically to Independent students to prepare them for life after University, help them progress to their desired profession and we also offer some priority internship or part-time job opportunities to these students.

The University additionally provided support with an enhanced graduation payment to acknowledge the additional challenges the pandemic has brought to these students and to ensure they can have the best possible start after they graduate.

In their Student Futures Manifesto, universities and students could therefore set out:

1. How they will ensure all students have access to, and feel comfortable to access, mental health support.
2. A commitment to join the University Mental Health Charter Programme, or a plan for enacting its recommendations.
3. Wider adoption through pulse surveys and other evaluation methods to monitor student wellbeing and act on feedback.
4. A route to more personalised ways of triaging student concerns, building on the best practice developed during the pandemic.



4. A clear outline for the teaching students will receive and the necessary tools to access it

“Whatever the academic literature says about delivering teaching, nothing beats asking your own students what’s working and what’s not.”

Professor Stephanie Marshall, Vice Principal (Education) at Queen Mary University⁴²

The pandemic has caused some radical shifts in how teaching is delivered and how learning takes place in higher education⁴³. The speed at which universities had to switch from in-person to fully online teaching was unprecedented. It was a shift necessitated by exceptional circumstances that allowed students to continue their education despite not being able to physically access a university campus.

As we outlined in our interim report, this turbocharging of digital learning speeded up a shift to online teaching tools, methods and pedagogies that had already been developing, albeit

more slowly, over a number of years. Many of these adaptations⁴⁴ have been beneficial to students, particularly those who need additional support with their learning. Significant progress has been made on accessibility and on developing more inclusive methods of assessment. Students clearly value the flexibility of being able to record and access learning resources at a time that suits them, particularly disabled students and those with caring commitments. And we’ve seen initial indications from HESA that the move to digital teaching, learning and assessment has coincided with a narrowing of attainment gaps⁴⁵.

⁴² <https://upp-foundation.org/student-futures-commission/news/building-back-better/>

⁴³ UUK: Lessons from the pandemic (December 2021). Available at: <https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/latest/insights-and-analysis/what-does-teaching-and-learning-look>

⁴⁴ As evidence by UUK: What does teaching and learning look like in England this year (November 2021). Available at: <https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/latest/insights-and-analysis/what-does-teaching-and-learning-look>

⁴⁵ UUK, Lessons from the Pandemic, 17th December 2021. <https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/what-we-do/policy-and-research/publications/lessons-pandemic-making-most>

“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 delivered⁴⁶.”

Written Evidence from Universities UK

However, the universities we have spoken to also recognise the challenge of balancing new modes of teaching with student expectations as they return to campus. It is clear that even when following best practice, the rapid and necessary switch to online learning had a negative impact on the overall student experience. Data from the ONS showed consistently that students who were dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with their academic experience at university were more likely to cite learning delivery as the reason, over quality of learning, access to resources, or personal support⁴⁷.

We believe now is the time to focus on embedding and stabilising the teaching and learning experience for students.

We’ve already outlined the importance of transitions and pre-university support in this report. But we would add to this the importance of communicating accurate information to students about the modes of teaching delivering. This should go beyond setting out what they can

expect – it must also explain why a particular method has been chosen, and how students can access support if they need it. This is particularly important where there is a significant diversity of modes of teaching being used across modules and courses.

Advances in digital teaching and learning accelerated by the pandemic have given universities the opportunity to innovate. This autonomy should be celebrated – but we would encourage higher education institutions to think more carefully about how this is communicated.

It would be helpful for universities to engage in evaluation of teaching and learning over the past two years to make evidence-based decisions about future practice, and for them to set out how teaching will be delivered in a way that allows students to gain not only the knowledge and skills they need to succeed, but also the social networks that are at the heart of, and fundamental to, the student experience.

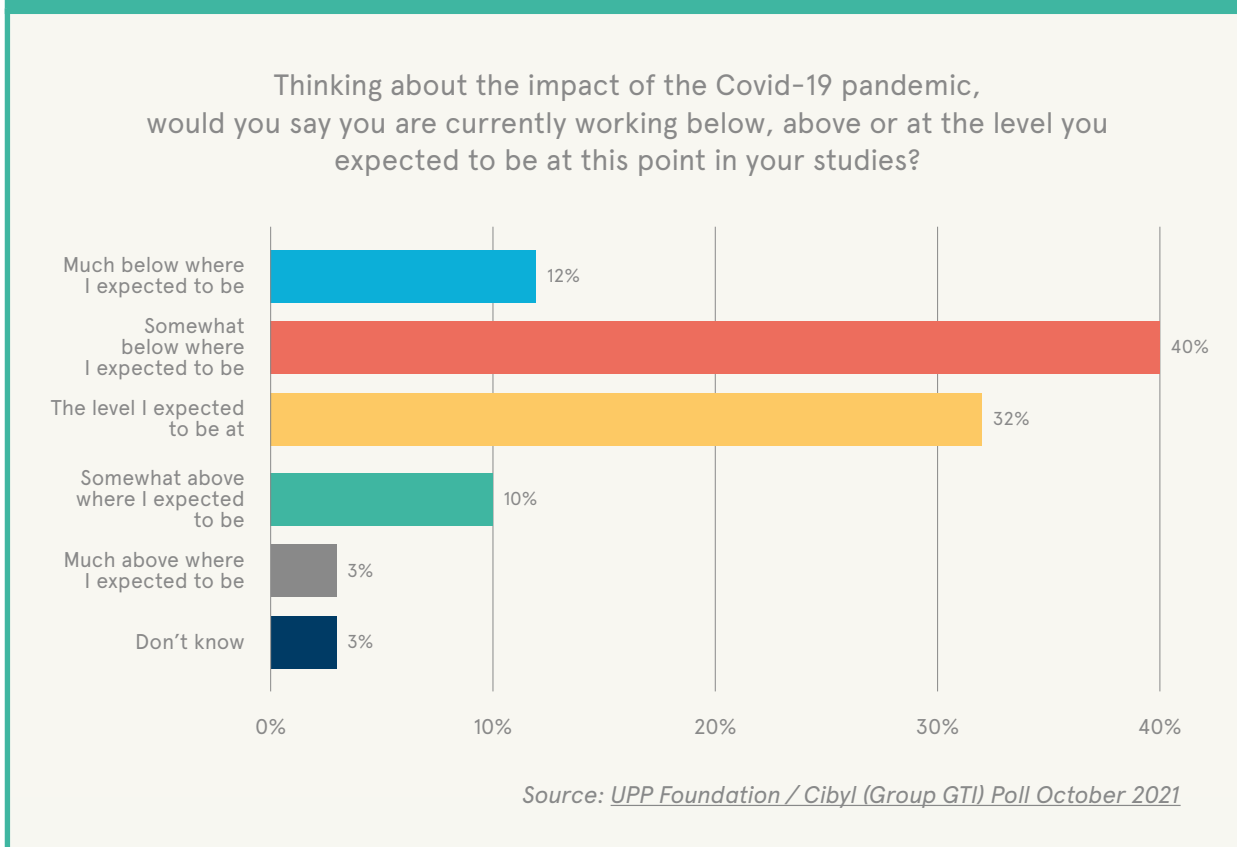
⁴⁶ Written evidence from Universities UK: <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1VUojFdtvD-K4SRrdmqQO1wbQlc8MHX5C/view?usp=sharing>

⁴⁷ ONS, Coronavirus and higher education students: England, 19 to 29 November 2021. Available at: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/healthandwellbeing/bulletins/coronavirusandhighereducationstudents/england19to29november2021>

“Students have been subject to an unplanned educational experiment in online and blended learning over the last two years. For most students, this has enabled them to continue with their studies and succeed. However, it has fundamentally changed students’ expectations of their university experience and we have yet to fully understand what that means for us in the future.”

University Vice Chancellor⁴⁸

Table 5: Impact of pandemic on expected level of study



⁴⁸ UPP Foundation Student Futures Commission Survey of University Vice Chancellors, September 2021: Comment given anonymously

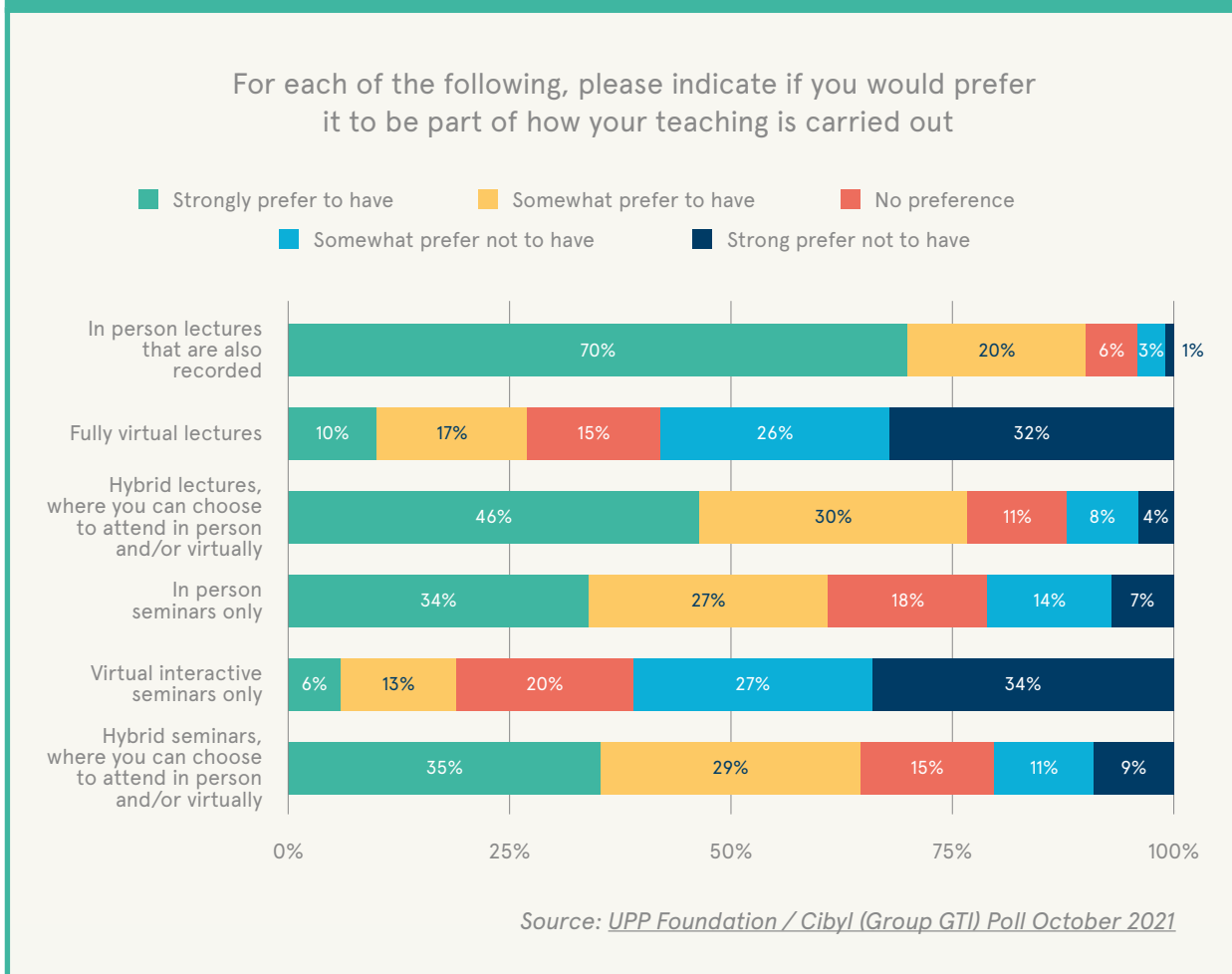
Finding stable ground for the delivery of teaching and learning

In our interim report⁴⁹ we outlined the tensions between:

- the consensus that some form of digital learning was here to stay,
- what students want from teaching and learning now, as they return to campus for the first time or after a year away and,
- what they might want in a year or in five years' time.

Our Autumn 2021 polling⁵⁰ showed a similar strong first preference for in-person teaching where content is also recorded. 90% said they would strongly or somewhat prefer their lectures to be delivered in this way. In-person seminars were also strongly preferred compared to a fully online alternative. Over half of our sample – 58% – said they somewhat or strongly prefer not to have fully virtual lectures as a method of teaching.

Table 6: Preference for teaching methods



⁴⁹ “Turbocharging the Future” Student Futures Commission Interim Report (September 2021): <https://upp-foundation.org/student-futures-commission/news/turbocharging-the-future/>

⁵⁰ UPP Foundation / Group GTI October 2021 Poll: http://upp-foundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/October-UPPF_Weighted.xlsx

But close behind, and ahead in the case of seminars specifically, is enthusiasm for new options of interactive hybrid or mixed modes of teaching, which gives students the choice to attend fully in person and/or virtually, which were supported as a teaching delivery method by 76% of students for lectures, and 64% for seminars.

Universities, in partnership with their students, are best placed to decide on the teaching methods that suit the needs of the course they are delivering. Ongoing engagement with students to ensure a mixed mode approach is sustainable and delivers on learning outcomes will therefore be important going forward.

Case Study: Mixed Mode Education Approach, Queen Mary University London

Queen Mary has been looking at implementing new methods to give students a better experience from even before the pandemic. ‘.

As part of this, QMU invested in developing a mixed mode education (MME) approach. MME brings together technology and pedagogy to support an inclusive and engaging learning experience for students, whether they are joining on-campus or remotely if they cannot attend in-person.

Over 100 teaching rooms have been equipped with technology, including audience-facing cameras and, in some cases, in-room microphones and additional screens to display remote participants. This enables interactions between the educator and students, as well as between students. The Queen Mary Academy, which provides University-wide support and development for staff engaged in education and research, has also trained over 1000 staff in using the MME approach and the benefits it offers to their pedagogic approach. And a number of larger teaching rooms have MME Stewards or Teaching Assistants, who support the educator in the effective running of the session.

Our evidence suggests three things are crucial:

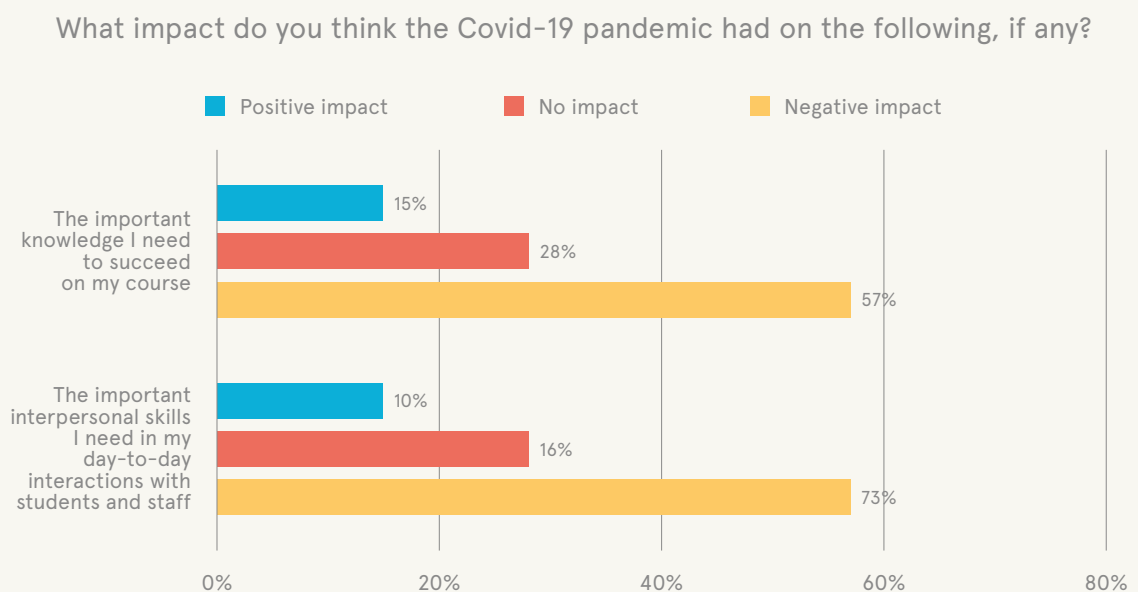
1) Students need to have the full information about teaching methods set out before they embark on the course.

While the pandemic forced teaching to be adapted at speed, as the sector stabilises after the pandemic it will be able to ensure new methods of teaching are clearly laid out for students so that they can make informed choices about where to study. We fully expect the sector will continue to innovate on teaching and it will continue to take the advancements it made during the pandemic forward. But in doing this it must take students with it and develop a narrative which commands student and public support as well.

2) Universities should prioritise and maximise opportunities for students to meet and learn in-person and on campus.

Our Autumn 2021 poll found that students felt strongly that Covid-19 had affected both their interpersonal and academic skills. 73% felt it had a negative impact on necessary interpersonal skills they needed in day-to-day interactions, and 57% said the pandemic had a negative impact on the knowledge they needed to succeed on their course. 52% of students are somewhat or much below where they personally expected to be in their studies as a result of Covid.

Table 7: Impact of the pandemic on knowledge and interpersonal skills



Source: *UPP Foundation / Cibyl (Group GTI) Poll October 2021*

When asked which activities made them feel most connected to the university experience, an overwhelming majority of students ranked taking part in academic activities at the top of the list (58%)⁵¹. Particularly if some public health restrictions remain or return and mixed-mode teaching continues

for much of the next two academic years, this will be vitally important in the short term. But institutions could also take this opportunity to set out how they will work to provide more on-campus spaces for students to meet, socialise and study in the longer term.

“Through the absence of hallway chats just before a lecture begins, or coffee meetings with study groups, many students have reported feeling that they are missing out – assuming that others are not facing the same challenges academically and socially.”

University of Leeds Student’s Union⁵²

3) Students and staff need the tools and skills to engage in online learning.

A report by The Sutton Trust found that sixth form students from lower socio-economic backgrounds were twice as likely to not have had adequate access to stable internet connections, devices, and study spaces⁵³. And we’ve seen similar evidence in our polling that

disadvantaged students are less likely to have a good home set up for learning remotely. 33% of students eligible for means tested funding said that a lack of access to a stable internet connection impacted their learning, compared to 24% of non-eligible students⁵⁴.

⁵¹ UPP Foundation / Group GTI October 2021 Poll: http://upp-foundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/October-UPPF_Weighted.xlsx

⁵² Written evidence from University of Leeds University Union. Available at: <https://docs.google.com/document/d/13AnkSCQX5k9oY1vrnkjfoMRSdl7N7PKf/edit?usp=sharing&ouid=103383222032451269348&rtpof=true&sd=true>

⁵³ Sutton Trust, COVID-19 and Social Mobility Impact Brief (May 2020). Available at: <https://www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/COVID-19-and-Social-Mobility-Impact-Brief-2.pdf>

⁵⁴ UPP Foundation / Cibyl (Group GTI) May 2021 Poll. Available at: <https://upp-foundation.org/student-futures-commission/news/students-prioritise-a-return-to-face-to-face-teaching-from-september-2021/>

For staff, this means the right continuous professional development to support the change to the way they deliver their teaching. For students, there will be a need to ensure the digital skills level of future cohorts is not overestimated, particularly if there is a need for high levels of flexibility between courses and

modules that mean students need to navigate multiple new systems and mixed methods of teaching delivery. Digital skills training will need to be updated to reflect this – and universities should work with students to find a method for delivering this that meets their needs.

“ We introduced [a] Foundation Week, for the first time. It was a week dedicated for all students to get them up to speed with IT skills, learning online, and so on. It was incredibly popular with students. I think we underestimated it because we think that they’re digitally advanced. We underestimated how confused students are with online skills. Even though they use phones all the time, they really felt they needed additional help with IT skills⁵⁵”

**Dr Paul Redmond – Director of Student Experience and Enhancement,
University of Liverpool**

More importantly, all students need the right equipment and software to access lectures, course material, and write essays. There is a growing ask of universities that they take on more responsibility to ensure students have

access to the software and hardware they need for any online learning – including a laptop that matches the specification they need for their course.

“Digital poverty will without doubt be the biggest limiting factor on successful delivery of high quality digital learning⁵⁶”

Written evidence from Teesside University

⁵⁵ UPP Foundation Student Futures Commission: First Oral Evidence Session June 2021. Available at: <https://upp-foundation.org/student-futures-commission/news/the-pandemic-hasturbocharged-the-future/>

⁵⁶ Written Evidence from Teesside University. Available at: <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1QoOu4UNTBzqp2cjZSm4OqHZ-P0a1gcw-/edit?usp=sharing&oid=103383222032451269348&rtpof=true&sd=true>

“We expect [digital] inequalities to inevitably have medium to longer term effects on HE participation and employment outcomes⁵⁷.”

Written Evidence from TASO – Transforming Access and Student Outcomes in Higher Education

Hardship funds have helped many students to address immediate concerns, but have placed increased demand on universities. UUK’s survey of 55 universities found that 78% of institutions reported an increase in hardship requests, and many were concerned that university funds will not be sufficient to meet demand for ongoing hardship needs.

If the university experience is increasingly moving to a blended approach of teaching, hardship funds are not a sustainable way to tackle ongoing digital poverty, nor do they help students address all the challenges they face when accessing online methods of learning vs. traditional in-person classroom teaching. Universities which are revisiting their Access and Participation Plans as required by the Office for Students, could consider including a ‘Digital Access and Participation Plan’ as part of this.

In their Student Futures Manifesto, universities and students could therefore set out:

1. How they will ensure students have visibility of the teaching and learning methods for their course, and what the benefits of those methods are.
2. A clear package of support for the most disadvantaged students to address digital inequalities – including, where appropriate, as part of a digital access and participation plan.
3. A new digital skills plan as part of a transition support package.

⁵⁷ Written Evidence from TASO. Available at: <https://drive.google.com/file/d/166QCrbJra6ktRS1C2V0k6NGWXsC9a5V8/view?rtfpof=true&sd=true>



5. Participation in activities inside and outside the curriculum that build skills, networks and communities

“The real jolt of the pandemic wasn’t to curriculum delivery.... the real jolt of the pandemic was to the more ‘immersive’ elements of university – the engagement in extended learning and activities which widened horizons, developed skills and so on. I’ve always felt this is a social justice issue – some students come into HE with those things already in their kitbag of cultural and social capital. The pandemic ripped into this. We have to rebuild it.”

Professor Sir Chris Husbands, Vice Chancellor, Sheffield Hallam University⁵⁸

The strength of the university community was what kept many institutions, staff and students going during the pandemic. Across formal and informal structures, effective working and communication between staff, students and students’ unions was vital in supporting students and will be vital for a successful recovery also. But at the same time, the pandemic severed connections

between students and their universities, with fewer opportunities to spend time on campus or to take part in the normal activities that make up the student experience. In our May 2021 poll, 85% of students said they had found it more difficult to make friends at university, and 78% had struggled to maintain the friendships they had been able to make⁵⁹.

⁵⁸ UPP Foundation Student Futures Commission Survey of University Vice Chancellors, September 2021

⁵⁹ UPP Foundation / Cibyl (Group GTI) May 2021 Poll. Available at: <https://upp-foundation.org/student-futures-commission/news/students-prioritise-a-return-to-face-to-face-teaching-from-september-2021/>

At a fundamental level, the challenges we have heard articulated from students and universities relate to a feeling of 'belonging'. In our interim report, we felt there had been a shift which had put belonging and the university community at the heart of student engagement. The university experience in the UK has always been about much more than sitting in lectures or taking exams – it has been about being part of a community, making new friends, learning new things about yourself, and discovering new places. It is no coincidence that many university graduates retain a connection to their institution for years or decades after their graduation.

As the Covid-19 pandemic threatens to undermine this feeling of belonging, leaving students isolated and peerless, we want to do everything we can to protect it, fostering connections between students and institutions and building strong communities that support each other.

Our work has found that it is vital that we rebuild links between students' communities and institutions, particularly focusing on peer networks and a sense of 'belonging' – not just for the potential positive impact it could have on student wellbeing, and building employability skills and social capital, but also as part of a wider civic agenda that further integrates students, universities and communities.

We would therefore strongly encourage universities to take this agenda forward in their conversations with students. This section outlines some emerging evidence, and some suggestions for how universities might be able to take these conversations forward.

Inside or outside?

There is an argument to be made that equitable access to the opportunities outside the curriculum is now an even more vital part of a student's experience of higher education.

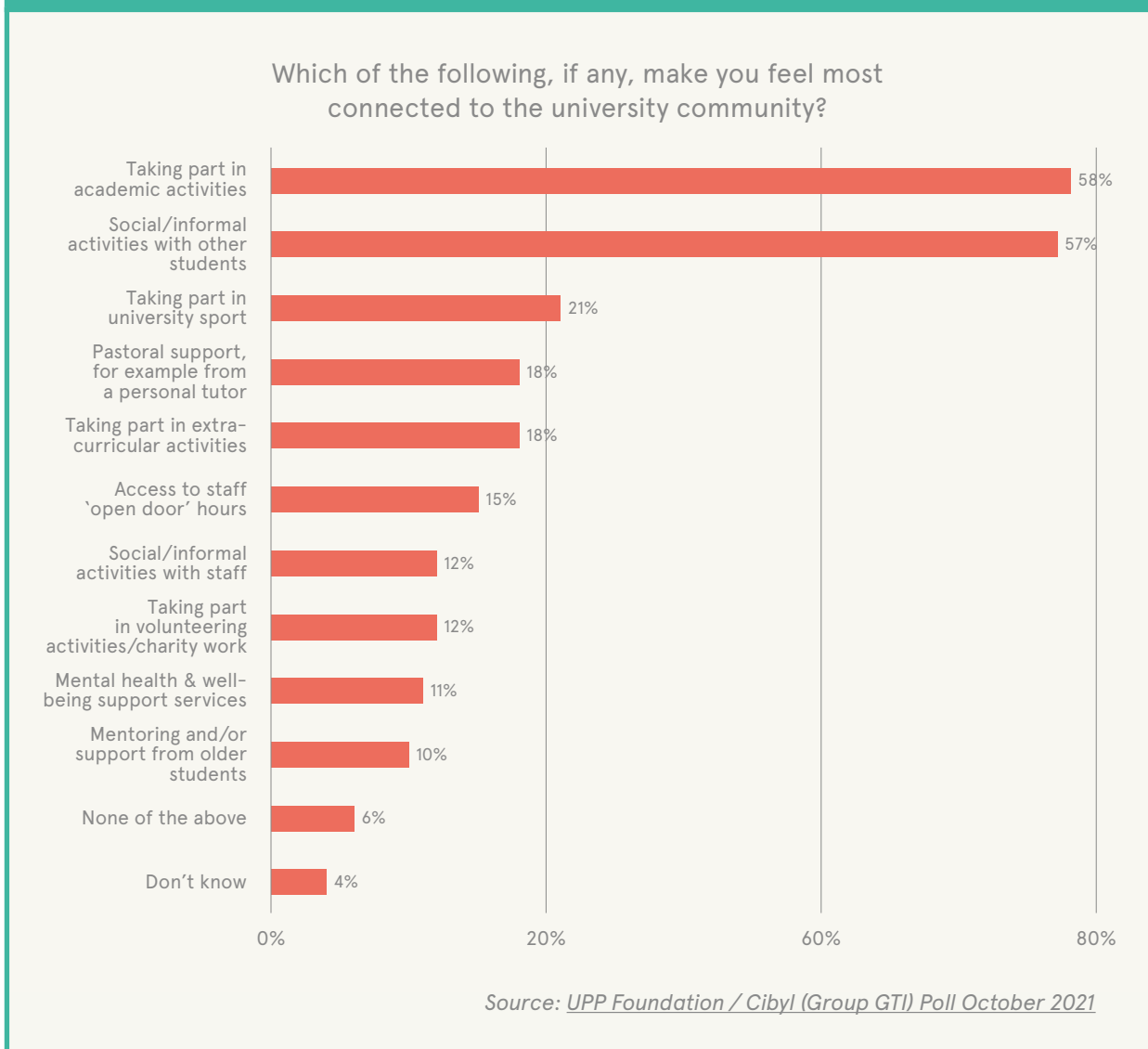
We already know these experiences aren't taken up by all students. Multiple submissions to our call for written evidence indicated that participation in extracurricular activities had fallen substantially, and the participation gap had widened, with students from disadvantaged backgrounds much less likely to engage in activities outside their formal timetabled studies. Reasons for this lack of engagement include digital fatigue after multiple hours online, financial pressures, and poor mental health or wellbeing. And this loss of connections, social learning and student development opportunities will dent students' confidence and preparedness for life after university.

Where do students feel like they belong?

We wanted to start by contributing to the growing evidence base on student belonging. In our Autumn 2021 poll⁶⁰, we wanted to find out where students currently feel the strongest sense of attachment to their university.

We have already set out the importance academic activities have on a students' sense of identity and belonging but having the opportunity to build social bonds and connections with other students through extracurricular activities and sport is close behind.

Table 8: Activities that make students feel most connected to the university community



⁶⁰ UPP Foundation / Group GTI October 2021 Poll: http://upp-foundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/October-UPPF_Weighted.xlsx

In spite of the best efforts of many across the sector, it is easy to see how these were both damaged and disrupted by the pandemic. Social activities are difficult to organise behind a screen; and virtual lectures preclude much of the natural socialising with peers that occurs when they are in person.

In addition, we feel that there is an opportunity for universities to make these extracurricular activities a core rather than a fringe part of the

university experience. This should be an active rather than a passive initiative, working with students' unions and existing societies, to re-engage and re-invigorate students in this vital part of university life. By embedding activities into the curriculum and making them part of the 'norm' for students, universities can begin to overcome the participation gaps that often exist with these sorts of initiatives. And we know there are many universities who are already excelling at this.

Case Study: University of Exeter, Festival of Discovery⁶¹

University of Exeter's Festival of Discovery emerged from a need to provide students with opportunities for in-person interaction and connections with their peers and the university at the end of the 2020-21 academic year. The eleven-day festival, which ran over summer, comprised more than 400 events across all campuses, including a programme of academic activities intended to immerse students in experiential learning and skills development so that they could re-engage with their study. Central to this was a programme of student society and club activities, including 'Give It A Go' initiatives.

⁶¹ Written evidence submitted by the University of Exeter

Case Study: University of Brighton, Belong at Brighton⁶²

Belong at Brighton aims to ensure that students feel a lasting sense of belonging to the University of Brighton as early as possible. It is an induction framework developed by University of Brighton which supports students transition to university. Launched for the academic year 2020-21, and expanded for autumn 2021, it provides course teams with key design principles to support effective welcome, induction and transition practices to improve connections to a student's department. The initiative covers students from the point of accepting an offer and provides offers support to students during their first term.

The programmes aims to identify and deliver activities that have a measured enhancement to the engagement, progression and continuation of students, through effective pre-arrival, welcome, induction, and curriculum design that supports effective transition and student success. By the end of the programme, students should feel confident to engage with studying their chosen course and able to navigate both virtual and physical learning systems. Students should also be able to identify curriculum-based and extra curricula sources to enable achievement, engagement and further opportunities, whilst fostering autonomy and independence.

When these activities are voluntary, or sit outside the curriculum, they're not always accessible to all students. Those with additional responsibilities outside their studies, whether a part-time job, financial pressures, caring responsibilities, or a long commute to campus, already struggle to engage at the same level as their peers. Whilst it is right that universities focus on the core academic curriculum,

a successful recovery should include planning and prioritisation of efforts on the extracurricular opportunities available to all students.

We therefore encourage institutions to go further and consider embedding some elements of this activity within the curriculum, as part of wider programme delivery for all students.

⁶² Written evidence submitted by the University of Brighton

One key way to bring these things together is through the more widespread introduction of service learning in UK universities. More common in the US, service learning brings together an academic component of study that students

then use more broadly in the community. As Professor Jonathan Grant set out in his evidence to the Commission, this helps bring the “extracurricular experience inside the curriculum⁶³.”

Case Study: King’s College London, Creating a generation of empowered change makers⁶⁴

The vision of King’s College London is to make the world a better place, going above and beyond what might conventionally be expected of a university. To this end, a commitment to Service is the third and equal part of the university’s academic mission.

The overarching goal is to create a generation of students with the capacity and will to become ‘empowered changemakers’. King’s is working to achieve this ambition through expanding Service-learning education programmes and the King’s First Year: Gateway to King’s pilot programme.

First Year is proposed as a 15-credit Service-learning module designed to support student transition into and through the first year of university study, developing skillsets and mindsets as part of the university’s commitment to Service, through a shared experience around which a community of lifelong learners can form. The aim is to test the module through a series of smaller scale pilots before rolling it out for all first-year undergraduates in 2025-26.

For King’s First Year, the student experience is inherently linked with the students’ engagement with local communities and global issues. As a year-long programme, King’s First Year will also allow students to form relationships with others outside of their courses of study and develop a deeper sense of belonging to the King’s community.

⁶³ UPP Foundation Student Futures Commission Second Oral Evidence Session (July 2021). Available at: <https://upp-foundation.org/student-futures-commission/news/its-about-getting-this-cohort-involved-in-what-the-world-will-become/>

⁶⁴ Written evidence submitted by King’s College London. Available at: https://docs.google.com/document/d/1lw3JsLaHaB4am8m2G-wlLOVfg2pWfq_v/edit

We've seen powerful case studies, showcased in this report, that demonstrate the benefits of bringing together previously divergent parts of the student experience. And it addresses an issue recently raised by Commissioner Richard Brabner⁶⁵, that we too often see a "two nations" student experience, with middle class students more likely to take part and benefit from the wider university experience and community than their peers who take second jobs, who have caring responsibilities, or who don't follow a traditional route into HE.

Placing these activities inside the curriculum where they traditionally were seen as separate additions to the student experience also means students can better understand the practical applications of their course content and develop future skills through real world application.

If there is to be a stronger focus in future on the role of belonging, community and participation on graduate outcomes, the Commission feels that the sector could learn from the emerging best practice on service learning.

⁶⁵ Richard Brabner / HEPI The One Nation University (November 2021) Available at: <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/The-One-Nation-University-Spreading-opportunity-reducing-division-and-building-community.pdf>

Case Study: Coventry University, Fab Lab

Fab Lab Coventry is a city-centre 'maker space' backed by Coventry City Council and the Centre for Trust, Peace and Social Relations at Coventry University, focussed on improving local employability. A maker space is a physical location where people gather to co-create, share resources and knowledge, work on projects, network, and build. Designed for and with the community at its heart, FabLab combines research from Coventry University with a practical community maker space to co-create innovative social, economic and environmental programs.

One of FabLab's core activities is developing the skills of local residents and helping individuals face and overcome challenges relating to employment, isolation and loneliness. They offer 31 different UK accredited courses and qualifications in a range of subjects including Digital Fabrication, Carpentry, Citizen Social Science and Community Health. They also run more specialised programmes to support target groups such as refugees and those furthest from the job market. In the academic year 2019/20, FabLab held 119 workshops, with 245 people enrolled onto projects and 112 qualifications achieved in that year, supporting 44 local businesses.

In their Student Futures Manifesto, universities and students could therefore set out:

1. How they will go about revitalising access to extracurricular activities for all students.
2. How activities that promote a sense of belonging may be integrated into curricula.
3. Ways in which Service Learning could promote a sense of belonging while also increasing students' skills and employability.



6. A clear pathway towards graduate outcomes

“Education for the sake of education is a luxury for a lot of students⁶⁶.”

**Dr Mark Peace, Academic Lead for Student Centred Curriculum,
Manchester Metropolitan University**

Employability should be a flagship pillar of the UK higher education learning experience. We have seen substantial evidence of the increasing work universities are putting into supporting their students to secure high quality employment after they graduate. It is clear that as well as the advancement of knowledge, universities have a vital role to play in developing students’ employability skills. We see this as a welcome statement, ensuring that student futures are at the heart of universities’ objectives.

We would like to see a situation where students have a detailed understanding of how, in each year of their study, their curriculum, course content, and student services, support future employability – and we know many universities are already doing this. There is an argument to be made for facilitating students’ access

to careers support from day one, with flexible, up-to-date, and skills-focused materials. And there is value in being offered a work based or service learning placement during their time at university.

Why the Commission focused on employability

As we set out in our Interim Report, students have told us they feel they are the cohort entering university with “fake grades” that might damage them in the future; 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. In a survey from the Sutton Trust, being able to gain the skills and experience needed for employment was the biggest current worry for students, with 76% fairly or very worried⁶⁷.

⁶⁶ UPP Foundation Student Futures Commission: Third Oral Evidence Session October 2021. Available at: <https://upp-foundation.org/student-futures-commission/news/a-renewed-focus-on-employability/>

⁶⁷ Sutton Trust Covid-19 and the University Experience (February 2021) Available at: <https://www.suttontrust.com/our-research/covid-19-and-the-university-experience-student-life-pandemic/>

“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 be⁶⁸.”

**Ryan Ginger, Membership Insight Coordinator,
City University of London Students’ Union**

And even though the evidence indicates that the graduate labour market has rebounded strongly, only 36% of our poll respondents said they felt very or somewhat optimistic about the strength of the graduate labour market, compared to 48% who

felt somewhat or very pessimistic⁶⁹. Anecdotally, we know many have opted out of pursuing graduate employment opportunities, turning instead to ‘panic Master’s’ to postpone their entry to what they perceive to be a disastrously competitive recruitment market.

“Perceptions that there are no jobs may have held some students and graduates back⁷⁰.”

Written Evidence from the University of Hertfordshire

⁶⁸ UPP Foundation Student Futures Commission: Students’ Union Evidence Session. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6fV4mV2dRfY>

⁶⁹ UPP Foundation / Cibyl (Group GTI) October 2021 Poll: http://upp-foundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/October-UPPF_Weighted.xlsx

⁷⁰ Written evidence from the University of Hertfordshire. Available at: https://docs.google.com/document/d/1FqjqnwkvOiNhVBZaTsSAxojQMFPNQp7_njxpuHNKnRk/edit?usp=sharing

Supporting graduates to navigate the new world of work

The evidence heard by the Commission indicates there is room for improvement in this area, especially when it comes to joining up the curriculum and the support available for students to give them the skills they need for the workplace.

Only 33% of students said they were slightly or very satisfied with the support their university had provided to help them find a job or work experience over the last 12 months.

And while 61% of students somewhat or strongly agree that the thing they learnt in their degree prepares them well for the working world, that leaves 40% of students who don't make a strong connection between the knowledge and skills they gain at university and their future employment. Over a third of students think that their university doesn't do enough to integrate workplace skills into the curriculum.

Table 9: Support to find job or work experience

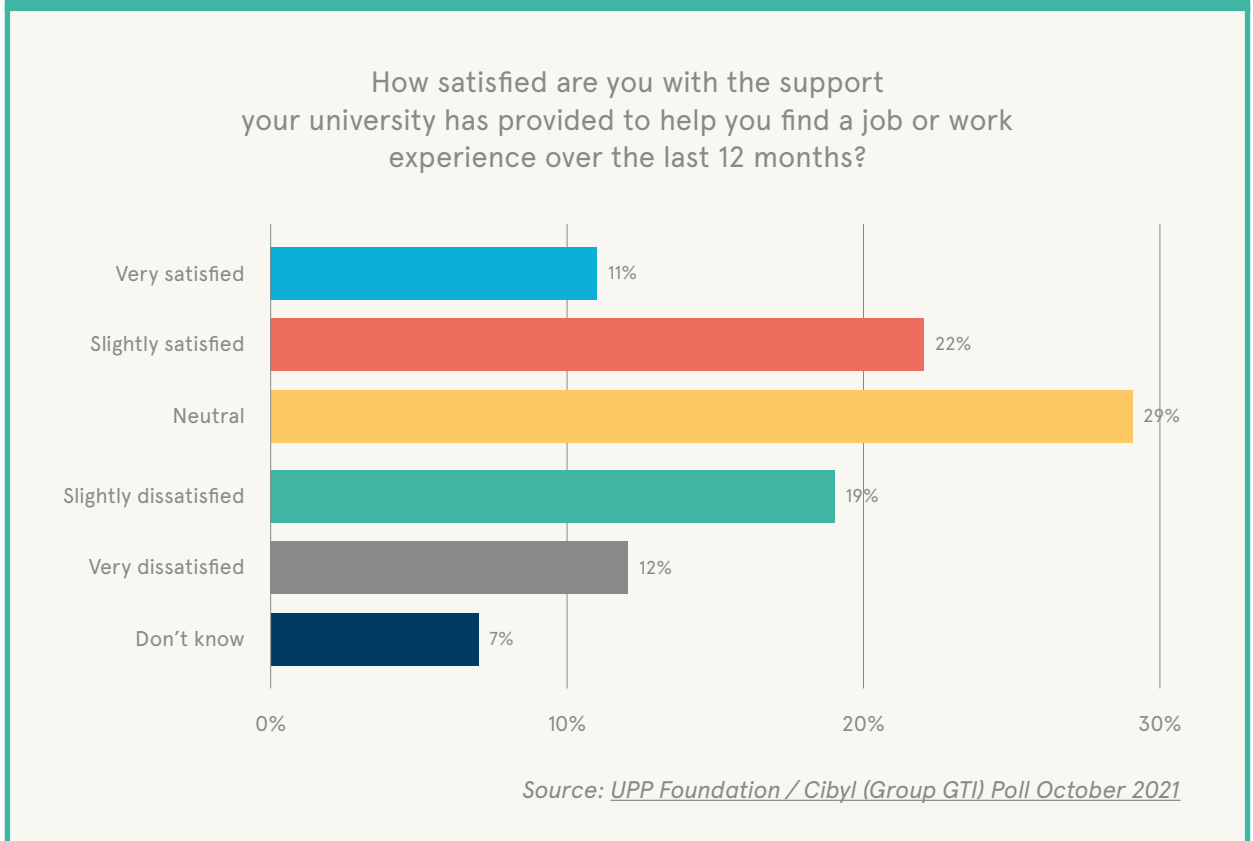
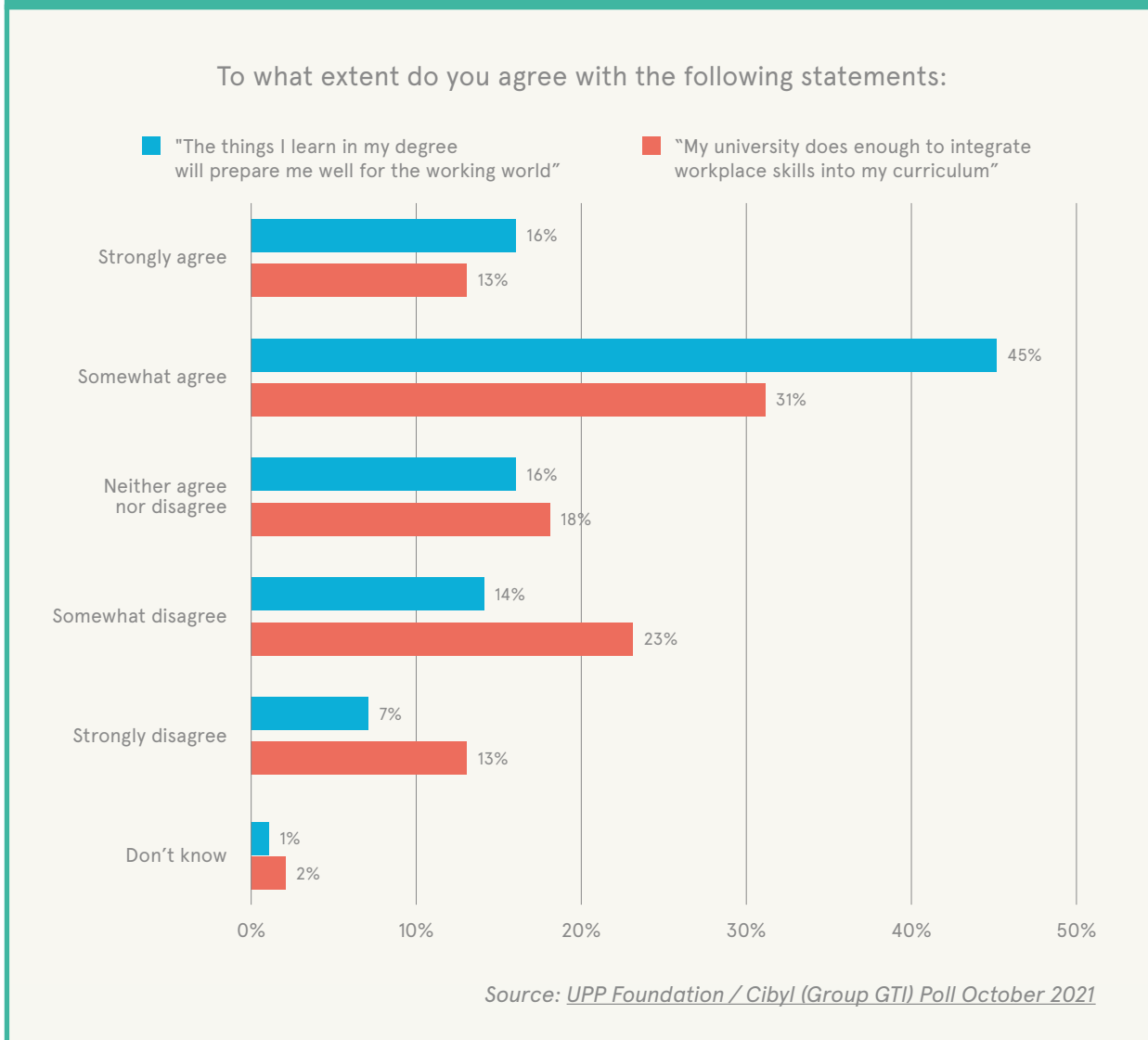


Table 10: Employability



We know that much of what is helping students is contained within their degree already⁷¹ – and yet we found in the course of our conversations that this was not always clear to students. They knew they were gaining new skills, but they weren't sure which ones or

how to advertise them to prospective employers. And this leads to employers feeling that students aren't equipped with the skills they need or they expected them to have on entering the workplace.

⁷¹ Daubney, Kate "Teaching Employability is not my job": redefining embedded employability, 2021.

“This generation is predicted to have 13 different careers in their lifetime. And 13 different careers is not one career trajectory set at University. So we’d love to see much more emphasis put on having to engage with employers and skills for employment as a compulsory part of degrees⁷².”

Natasha Porter, CEO Unlocked Graduates

In part, this might be because the world of work has also undergone a shift in the last two years. Recent research by the Institute of Student Employers found that almost a quarter (24%) of employers are recruiting students who will be working from home more often than they come into the office⁷³. And we know students are aware of the changes that are taking place in the workplace. The rise of home working across many sectors, not just in universities, means that students’ priorities for their first graduate job have also changed, reflecting trends in the labour market. Our May 2021 poll⁷⁴ found that flexible working, job security and opportunities for training and development are all more important for graduates than before the pandemic, with location less important.

All of this has added to the pace of existing change that was occurring before the pandemic. We’ve heard from students and universities that alongside traditional graduate routes, students are increasingly interested in starting their own business, or juggling multiple roles in ‘portfolio careers’. There is a focus on areas of the economy that are SME and start-up dominated – for example digital and tech, creative arts and fashion. And many of the industries that students will find themselves working in after graduation may look unrecognisable in five, ten, or twenty years’ time. So not only are the jobs different and therefore the skills needed, but those skills will also change over time.

⁷² UPP Foundation Student Futures Commission: Third Oral Evidence Session October 2021. Available at: <https://upp-foundation.org/student-futures-commission/news/a-renewed-focus-on-employability/>

⁷³ Institute for Student Employers, Will homeworking and virtual recruitment dominate 2022, 7th December 2021: <https://insights.ise.org.uk/policy/blog-will-homeworking-and-virtual-recruitment-dominate-2022/>

⁷⁴ UPP Foundation / Cibyl Group GTI Poll. Available at: <https://upp-foundation.org/student-futures-commission/news/students-prioritise-a-return-to-face-to-face-teaching-from-september-2021/>

“There is a danger in projecting onto 2021-22 graduates assumptions about the labour market, graduate labour market that are 25-30 years out of date⁷⁵”

Professor Sir Chris Husbands, Vice Chancellor, Sheffield Hallam University

Case Study: University of Birmingham, Elevate Programme

In response to the evolving world of work, the University of Birmingham launched Elevate, a bespoke programme of support for students and recent graduates wanting to start and scale their own business. Based within 'The Exchange' building, in the heart of Birmingham's business district, it enables those on the programme to shape their futures, whilst at the same time retaining talent, wealth and job creation in the region.

The first cohort started in September 2021 with just over 30 businesses, several who are supported via equity-free funding, helping to democratise the pursuit of innovation. With inclusivity an essential aim of the programme, the current cohort is diverse with a quarter of founders from IMD 1 and 2 areas, approximately half are female and over half are from a black or other minority ethnic background.

The businesses supported also represent a diverse range of sectors, including a social enterprise using the power of e-sports to help young people fight social isolation and loneliness. Collectively over £250,000 of investment has been raised to date by the Elevate businesses.



Students at the University of Birmingham Elevate Programme

⁷⁵ UPP Foundation Student Futures Commission: Third Oral Evidence Session October 2021. Available at: <https://upp-foundation.org/student-futures-commission/news/a-renewed-focus-on-employability/>

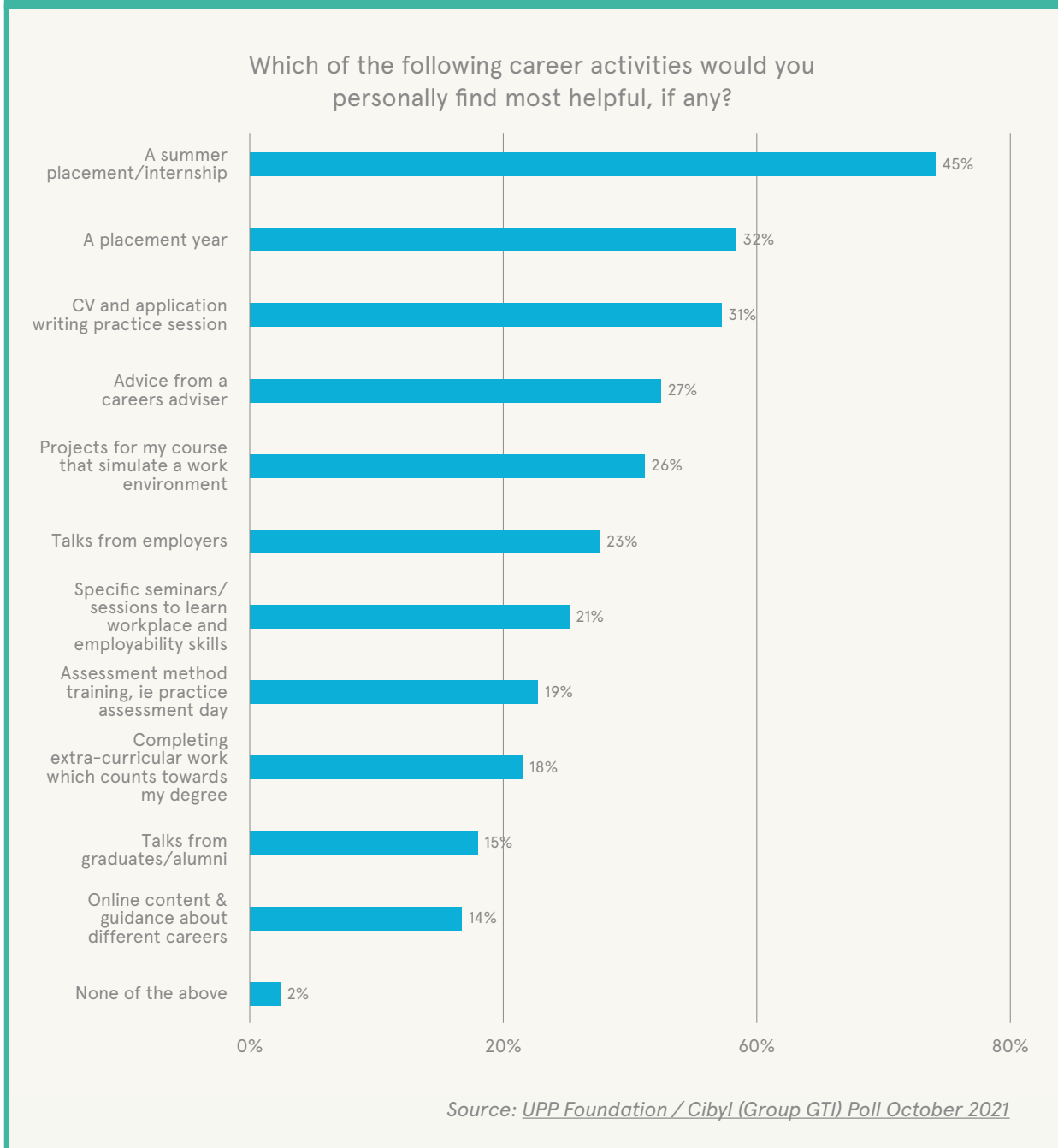
Case Study: Aston University, Work placements

Aston University uses compulsory placement years as a way to drive up employability skills. Whilst it is not compulsory for every single student or course, it is always an option for Aston students, and is a key part of the institution's DNA. The fact that employability is so central to the university's mission is crucial – students do not feel they are missing out on a third year with their friends, as most of them will be doing placements as well. Even outside of that placement year, learning outcomes for modules are explicitly badged in the curriculum, so students know how their studies will help them in the world of work. From their 2017/18 placement cohort, 44% of employers confirmed that if an opportunity had been available they would offer their placement student a permanent role.

All this shows the importance of embedding and integrating work-related skills and learning into the core student experience and curriculum. This would then sit alongside much of the excellent practice developed by careers and employability support services within institutions, something which many students want. When we asked which activities students would find most helpful to future employability, those that allowed students to engage directly with employers came top of the list, with 45% of students prioritising a placement or internship, and 32% the opportunity to take a placement year.

The additional value of activities that are strategically linked to improving employability outcomes, and make up a core part of the curriculum for all students, is that it allows students to make time and space to participate as an integral part of their studies. In particular, the Commission would encourage further creative exploration of how activities that support employability can be recognised, rewarded and credited.

Table 11: Career Activities



Case Study: Manchester Metropolitan RISE Programme⁷⁶

RISE is a programme available to all students at the Manchester Metropolitan University. It enables them to 'over-credit' their degrees with additional units based on engagement with employment enhancing extra-curricular experience.

The project allows students to pursue and recognise their independent ventures, alongside a programme of courses, projects, mobilities and placements, and an assessment methodology which supports them to understand and communicate the value of that experience.

Data from the project suggests that the "over-crediting" aspect of the programme means the project has consistently engaged students who may otherwise be less assured of success within and beyond their studies. This is true for BAME students (+8%), commuting (+10%), first-generation students (+2%) and disabled students (+6%).

⁷⁶ <https://upp-foundation.org/student-futures-commission/news/case-study-rise-programme-manchester-metropolitan-university/>

And as we set out in the International Student Futures Report, co-chaired by Commissioner Professor Mary Stuart, employment support for international students is a flagship part of their learning experience. The research,

which included focus groups of 60 students in seven universities, gave a clear message that employability should remain not just a top priority, but is also a huge opportunity for growth.

Findings from the International Students Sub-Commission⁷⁷:

UK universities should develop employment support for international students as a flagship pillar of their learning experience to remain globally competitive.

Universities should:

- a. Provide dedicated international placement officers who work with local and national companies to coordinate existing opportunities, including Knowledge Exchange Partnerships as well as finding new opportunities for international students.
- b. Continue to provide dedicated employability support as international graduates enter the early stages of their careers, whether that is within the UK or abroad.
- c. Collaborate to increase the support provided for graduates seeking employment in their home countries.

Government should:

- a. Develop a co-ordinated approach to regional trade support that will also enable placement opportunities for international students and consider how further roll out of initiatives such as the Sheffield China Gateway Scheme could be supported.
- b. Develop a pro-active and sector specific campaign targeting employers as part of the UK International Education Strategy.
- c. Ensure all universities have access to robust representative international graduate outcomes data either through HESA's Graduate Outcomes or alternative sources.

⁷⁷ UPP Foundation International Students Report. Available at: <https://upp-foundation.org/student-futures-commission/news/international-student-futures-report/>

Supporting organisations can help by:

- a. Coordinating a national level resource for international graduates seeking employment back home.
- b. Continuing to support the sharing of good practice in relation to employability support.
- c. HESA and others should closely monitor the impact of the decision to cease calling non-EU international graduates for their graduate outcomes survey.

In their Student Futures Manifesto, universities and students could therefore set out:

1. How students will be made aware of the employability skills they gain from their course and wider activities, such as through an annotated curriculum plan which highlights employability skills students will gain from different modules.
2. How they will maximise the number of students who are able to engage directly with the world of work through formal placements, internships, entrepreneurship schemes, or other opportunities.
3. A programme of work-related learning such as through a formal placement or internship, or service learning, which the university facilitates.
4. Careers support which extends from before arrival to after graduation – including blending and tailoring approaches from the list above, and others, to support the student.

Delivering a manifesto, and delivering on student success

We want to support universities to deliver tangible improvements to the outcomes of student cohorts now and in the future. What we have set out is a loosely-drawn framework which will help universities and students to pursue this. But it is clear that the solutions themselves will vary from university to university – we have avoided overly prescriptive proposals or activities because we know that universities and students are best placed to develop their unique voice for student success through their Manifestos.

To be successful in delivering the themes for student success set out in this report, universities will want to focus on institutional planning and strategy for students across all areas of the student experience identified. We recommend a member of the leadership team takes responsibility at a strategic level for Student Futures Manifestos. This will give students a visible leader with whom they can engage and co-create their manifestos and an approach to evaluation. This person would most likely report to the Vice-Chancellor or equivalent, and take responsibility for devising the manifesto with students, setting out a communication strategy for it, and a schedule of regular impact monitoring and evaluation.

The ideas we have set out in this report will require a genuinely ‘whole university’ approach, so finding a way to focus the work without creating silos around Faculties, Schools, departments or teams is especially important. This is why we propose that universities consider having a single member of their leadership team to take ownership of pulling the manifesto work together.

This leader would take responsibility and oversight, most likely alongside existing commitments in the education/student experience portfolio, for:

- Co-creating an institution specific Student Futures Manifesto.
- Developing a communication strategy.
- Committing to regular impact evaluation and monitoring, and to supporting the sector with wider evaluation of student success over the next five years.

As we have set out, students themselves must be part of both developing the solutions and monitoring their success. Our polling and in-person engagement with students at multiple university campuses has given us a valuable insight into what students think – but that is not enough on its own. Interventions which are designed to support students need to be co-created with students. One of the greatest strengths of the higher education sector is its diversity – so we welcome the fact that student bodies in different HE institutions may well come up with very different interventions within the guidelines we have set out. This diversity means that universities can, and should, also look to each other over time to share best practice.

As well as being part of the ideas, students must also be part of the evaluation.

Universities should not be afraid of getting some things wrong, as long as they are able to monitor progress and change tack if needed. Some interventions will be more effective than others in improving wellbeing and attainment – and that is to be welcomed. Indeed, the same intervention in two different institutions may yield different results. So universities should have access to clear, simple metrics through which they can monitor progress over time.

A culture of openness and transparency will demonstrate to students that it truly is a joint effort between them and their university. Where things are not working as intended, students should be able to ask questions about what isn't working and engage with creating solutions. Fundamentally, we see this framework as the beginning of an active conversation between universities and their students to continue over many years.

Part Three: Areas for further inquiry

The majority of this report has focused on how we think universities can plan strategically for successful student futures to meet the needs of students while supporting institutional priorities.

But there are three areas of work where we would call for further inquiry across the sector.

Recommendation 1: A new national technology infrastructure strategy.

Online learning is not a new concept – many universities and colleges have been developing online learning platforms for decades. For some, most notably the Open University, a digital approach to teaching was already firmly standard.

But it was the scale and pace of the shift during the pandemic that was different, alongside the fact that all students and teaching staff needed to embrace it, regardless of previous experience. We've outlined some of the challenges of this with regards to students in the earlier chapter on teaching and learning.

But further sector wide work is needed to support the underlying systems and technology infrastructure. Jisc have recently carried out two large scale surveys of both students and staff to assess how they handled the shift to large scale digital teaching and learning.

The most recent analysis of how university staff managed was published in November 2021⁷⁸. This summarised its conclusions as follows:

"Having to learn how to facilitate learning, teaching and assessment in an online environment meant upskilling for some. This, combined with the need to troubleshoot their own technical problems as well as those of their students, while continuing to deliver high class teaching, was challenging and pushed some staff outside of their comfort zones"

In particular, the Jisc survey identified a number of practical barriers from the staff side in terms of the necessary systems to support their teaching. This included the following problems being cited by survey respondents across HE:

- 51% said they suffered from a poor wifi connection.
- 25% struggled with access to online platforms/services.
- 20% had insufficient access to specialist software.
- 16% had no suitable computer/device for online teaching.
- 16% didn't have a safe, private area to work.
- 12% reported concerns with mobile data costs.

As Guild HE noted in response to the report:

"While it is positive that 66% of teachers were offered support and 54% rated the support they were given as 'best imaginable', 'excellent' or 'good' it still suggests a sizeable portion of the teaching workforce did not receive the support needed to deliver a high-quality learning experience online"

Jisc also carried out a parallel study of students' experiences, which reported in September 2021. This, similarly, found issues with students' ability to access online learning.

- 63% of students said they had problems related to poor wifi connectivity and 24% cited mobile data costs as an issue.
- Students from Black/African/Caribbean backgrounds were more likely to say they had no access to a suitable computer/device than the data set generally.
- Students studying online, on campus or in public places were more likely to cite problems across a range of issues⁷⁹.

⁷⁸ Teaching staff digital experience insights survey 2020/21: UK higher education (HE) survey findings, November 2021: <https://repository.jisc.ac.uk/8568/1/DEI-HE-teaching-report-2021.pdf>

⁷⁹ Student digital experience insights survey 2020/21: UK higher education (HE) survey findings (September 2021): <https://repository.jisc.ac.uk/8487/1/Student%20DEI%20HE%20report%202021%20Final.pdf>

Jisc has done excellent work in helping universities share good practice, and to set strategies for digital transformation – around both software, and hardware. But their most recent guidance on this was published only in October 2020⁸⁰ – a long time ago, given the step change in the subsequent eighteen months.

The Commission heard evidence from university leaders suggesting that the end-user problems experienced were difficult to fix while the underlying technology stack in many universities is outdated, often without support and still running on on-premises data centres. This means that large IT teams are spending too much of their resource to keep legacy systems working. Unmodernised data systems architecture means that universities find it hard to integrate new, modern cloud-based applications and SaaS solutions, including those which support the rapid integration and use of digital teaching, learning and assessment technologies.

We recommend that Jisc build upon their leadership work first to review the existing technology estate in HE, and then, as a matter of urgency, produce further guidance to help universities more rapidly modernise their systems architecture and applications. While many universities already have ‘digital

transformation’ plans underway, further guidance to universities about the basic architectural building blocks and data systems to support a digital university, and how to plan and execute a transformation, would be welcomed. The centrality of technology now means there is a case for this sector leading approach, because this remains a core strategic capability which leadership teams struggle with.

It is important that, within their budgetary envelope, universities are able to replace outdated legacy IT with modern platform based architecture that supports digital teaching, learning and assessment, as well as the core support services that can be improved with digital tools.

Recommendation 2: A commitment to a “what works” review of online teaching, learning and assessment.

Our interim report concluded that “If the future is digital, universities need to work out how to communicate these new modes of teaching to students and the wider public”.

⁸⁰ Digital at the core: a 2030 strategy framework for university leaders. October 2020: <https://www.jisc.ac.uk/guides/digital-strategy-framework-for-university-leaders>

Our evidence showed that there is a consensus that some form of digital learning is here to stay – many institutions believe mixed mode learning has real potential, and they wish to capitalise on recent advances. However, the sector is finding itself under intense pressure – from some students, and via the media – to explain and justify its moves. For many outside HE, ‘blended’ or ‘hybrid’ learning looks like a low-value cost-cutting measure.

Since the publication of that report, the Commission has been struck that the topic continues to be one of the most discussed in the sector. Whether through the specialist HE media or on conference platforms, many people are grappling with the twin challenges of developing new pedagogic approaches and communicating the benefits of mixed-mode education to students and the public.

We were also struck that the debate is often unhelpfully polarised between those who believe that digital learning is the future and should be maintained or accelerated, and those who recognise the importance of face-to-face lectures. Our own polling showed that students retain a strong desire for face-to-face learning, but also want digital resources to enhance the traditional offer. Many would be outraged if some of the new digital learning resources were removed.

There appears to be no consensus within the sector as to where the marginal pound, or the marginal teaching hour, should be invested. This is therefore a real debate, and by no means a trivial one. On everything from curriculum and course design, through to staff recruitment, timetabling, availability of hardware or software, to the structuring of professional services, it matters what decisions universities make.

In particular, there is a false dichotomy in the “online learning is valuable and helpful for students” versus “online learning is less effective” debate. The truth is that it is both, it is neither, and it is either. Well planned and well sequenced online learning can be helpful, and often supports access and assessment. Equally, badly planned online learning can be significantly less helpful for both student learning and broader wellbeing than more traditional models of seminars, lectures, tutorials and labs. While some basic online resources can be relatively inexpensive, a fully digitally-enhanced curriculum will need significant investment to support student success and continuation. Online learning can be cheaper (and that is no bad thing, if it allows for more resources to be invested in front line services), but depending on quality it can be more expensive.

If digital is here to stay, as the Commission expects, then, as Debbie McVitty has written for Wonkhe, “conversations about pedagogy should come out of the shadows”⁸¹. There is a case for a nationally commissioned review of effective digitally enhanced pedagogy for UK higher education, which should lead to the development of fundamental good practice for online teaching and learning. Alongside this, a similar good practice toolkit for digital assessment approaches should also be developed. We recommend that AdvanceHE might undertake or commission this work.

Recommendation 3: A targeted ‘challenge fund’ for well evidenced proposals to support student mental health and wellbeing.

It is uncontentious to note that students are reporting lower levels of wellbeing and higher levels of mental ill health. Our polling and much of the evidence we heard from experts noted a significant increase in students experiencing anxiety, low mood and specific mental health problems.

The higher education sector recognised that there was a need to address this even before the pandemic, and significant initiatives

such as the launch of the University Mental Health Charter, supported by Government, and founded on the ‘whole university’ approach to student mental health and wellbeing, are now widely recognised as pivotal in changing this narrative of decline.

Many universities have signed up to the Charter Programme, and it is clear that there are huge benefits to this, allowing institutions to share best practice and learn from one another. However, it’s also clear that there are significant challenges in working towards this whole university, or settings-based approach. It requires HEIs to consider much more than their student support services, and involves a shift into considering the role of the teaching and curriculum, and the role of the physical, social and work environments of an institution in addressing and promoting mental health and wellbeing. It is also important to recognise that universities will be in very different positions regarding what they feel they need to do to support their students’ wellbeing in the late/post-pandemic era. This reflects both the diversity of mission and student demographics between institutions but also the maturity of current initiatives which will vary widely between providers.

While increased funding overall would no doubt be welcomed, we recommend that funding targeted at areas of most need and/or at solving new or changing manifestations of poor mental health and wellbeing

⁸¹ <https://wonkhe.com/blogs/public-engagement-in-pedagogy-is-long-overdue/>

would be most effective. This could be provided in the form of a competitive bid fund, similar to the OfS Challenge Competition on achieving a step change in mental health⁸², with a focus on innovative solutions, particularly for initiatives aimed at improving wellbeing and reducing mental ill-health.

All of which leads the Commission to conclude that there is a need for additional funding, but that it needs to recognise different university needs, and their different starting points. As such, We therefore recommend that the Government create and structure a competitive grant pot, to which universities make flexible bids according to their particular needs.

This fund, and proposals, should be centred broadly around mental health and wellbeing but should also allow flexibility in recognising the breadth of possible solutions. For example, evidence from Student Minds at our oral evidence session made clear that sometimes the worst thing for a student's mental health and wellbeing is financial hardship, or insecure accommodation. Universities would be able to develop their own bids that showed their work and appreciation of the particular challenges that their students are facing, and how funds could be used to mitigate these.

“When thinking about mental health and well being, the most immediate risks I’m thinking of are the financial hardship”

Dominic Smithies, Student Voice and Equality Lead, Student Minds

Of course, some universities may be sure that additional support services would be needed, but a fund should encourage wider thinking. The competitive nature of the fund replicates the two “challenge competitions” run by the OFS – in 2018 and in 2020⁸³. But it builds on these, both in its scale and breadth. Previous OFS competitions have allocated around £3m per fund and awarded between ten and twenty successful

bids. Given the nature of the need, we recommend any new fund is more ambitious – and should seek to accommodate many more successful bids. The criteria should be sufficiently flexible to allow, and encourage, universities to take innovative approaches to addressing mental health – while recognising the need to evaluate all successful bids to provide wider learning across the sector.

⁸² <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/student-wellbeing-and-protection/student-mental-health/improving-mental-health-outcomes/>

⁸³ <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/student-wellbeing-and-protection/student-mental-health/improving-mental-health-outcomes> and <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/funding-for-providers/mental-health-funding-competition-using-innovation-and-intersectional-approaches/>

Conclusion

A Student Futures Manifesto, co-created and co-owned by students and their university, will represent an authentic and powerful expression of what universities are for and about, rooted in the foundations they build for successful lives and careers for their graduates. There is much to gain for universities and students to jointly reaffirm their commitment to work as a community on behalf of successful student futures. While acknowledging the tragedy and disruption of the pandemic, our proposals are resolutely optimistic and build on the extraordinary resilience and creativity that was demonstrated so viscerally during the pandemic by colleagues and students across the higher education sector. As the pandemic disruption begins to recede, all of us in higher education can raise our sights to successful student futures.



UPP Foundation
1st Floor, 12 Arthur Street
London EC4R 9AB

T: +44 (0)20 7398 7200
F: +44 (0)207 398 7201
upp-foundation@upp-ltd.com

upp-foundation.org

WONKHE



SHAKESPEARE
MARTINEAU