UPP Foundation

Student Futures Commission

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#studentfutures

Why the Student Futures Commission?

- Universities and their partners have worked tirelessly hard this year, in extraordinary circumstances **BUT**, Covid has clearly been disruptive for students in terms of their learning, living, experience, wellbeing and graduate opportunities.

- While there is concerted government support for schools and children, universities are expected to do this largely themselves .

- We felt there was a gap in bringing together insights, ideas and suggestions from across the entire higher education sector to help students secure their successful futures – and to **help universities support each other as well.**

- **We want a positive and constructive approach to supporting the future of the student experience.**

The Student Futures Commission 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.

We've heard evidence from across the sector on our three themes: **Teaching and Learning, Student Experience and Wellbeing, and Employability.**

Our Commissioners

- **Mary Curnock Cook CBE** – Chair
- **Richard Brabner** – Director, UPP Foundation
- **Professor Colin Bailey CBE** - President and Principal, QMUL
- **Mark Blythe** – Founder and Chairman, Group GTI
- **Anne-Marie Canning MBE** – Chief Executive, The Brilliant Club
- **Professor Juliet Foster** – Dean of Education, KCL
- **Professor Becky Francis** – Chief Executive, EEF
- **Hillary Gyebi-Ababio** – Vice President HE, NUS
- **Stephen Isherwood** – Chief Executive, Institute of Student Employers
- **Smita Jamdar** – Partner and Head of Education, Shakespeare Martineau
- **Alistair Jarvis** – Chief Executive Universities UK
- **Dr Omar Khan** – Director, TASO
- **Nikita Khandwala** – Strategy at Linkedin and Co-Founder of Unbox
- **Mark Leach** – Founder, Editor in Chief and Chief Executive, WonkHE
- **Kate Owen** – Chief Marketing Officer, UPP
- **Meg Price** – President, Worcester Students' Union
- **Professor Lisa Roberts** – Vice Chancellor, University of Exeter
- **Professor Mary Stuart CBE** – Vice Chancellor, University of Lincoln

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We've heard evidence from across the sector

- We've held 4 formal evidence sessions: on teaching and learning, student engagement and wellbeing, and on employability, as well as and a session with Students' Unions
- With Group GTI, we polled 2147 university students from across the UK between 14th – 19th May.
- We ran a focus group session with Year 12 and 13 students taking part in The Access Project.
- We received 40 written evidence submissions from 10 universities, 9 students' unions and 20 sector organisations including UUK, JISC, OIA and UCAS.
- **Our interim report – "Turbocharging the Future" was published in September**

If the future is digital, universities need to work out how to communicate this: to students and to the wider public

1. **Our evidence shows that there is a consensus that some form of digital learning is here to stay** - many institutions genuinely believe blended learning has real potential, and that they wish to capitalise on the advancement they
2. **The sector is finding itself under intense pressure** - from students, and via the media - to explain and justify its moves. For many outside HE, online learning looks like a low value cost cutting measure
3. Universities will need to work considerably harder from September with students and with parents, including through the media, to understand expectations and make clear definitions of 'hybrid' or 'blended' learning.

*"**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 student's expectations of their university experience and we have yet to fully understand what that means for us in the future. This, combined with the fact that we are not yet sure of how impacted by disadvantage our future students will be, is a major challenge for universities."*

Uncertainty is impacting students and institutions

1. **Overwhelmingly, students reported a sense of uncertainty and a lack of confidence**; they feel they are entering university with "fake grades" that might damage them in the future; they are unsure about the teaching on offer this year and about the threat of further periods of lockdown; they feel that they are below the standard they expected to be academically; and they have little confidence in the future employment market once they graduate.
2. **Unclear or inconsistent advice from the Government, is contributing to the anxiety and unease felt by students and by institutions** – and was referenced in many of the responses we received from Vice Chancellors.

"The real worry is uncertainty. One can plan for almost any scenario but it's the combination of uncertainties – political (which shapes funding), cultural (what are the shifting expectations and how will they on out), economic (how quickly will the jobs market and demand bounce back. ***Given this uncertainty, how confident can we be that we make the big calls very quickly and mobilise the organisation quickly****"*

Mental health & student wellbeing will need to be top of everyone's priority lists

1. **Students are going to be under a range of increased pressures this year; and many are still recovering from the impact of the pandemic**
2. Some will struggle to re-engage with the student experience fully. They will need support to re-engage with extra curricular activities, participation in which has declined significantly, and to build or rebuild friendships and connections with their peers
3. There are also risks - both for individuals and for institutions - that many students will plan to go "twice as hard" when terms restarts in September, particularly with much of the traditional student nightlife having been closed since March 2020.

> *"**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 to have an effective learning community in the new post pandemic environment"*

Belonging is the new measure of student engagement

1. Our evidence has shown that place and belonging are as important as ever – if not more important now after a year of virtual engagement.
2. Students will support to re-engage with extra curricular activities, participation in which has declined significantly, and to build or rebuild friendships and connections with their peers.
3. Engagement in extracurricular opportunities, and fostering a sense of belonging in the university community, are both well-evidenced ways to improve mental wellbeing. **Both have been in short supply over the past two years, and will take concerted effort to rebuild.**

> *"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."***

We've found there's a real decline in student confidence

- Students have told us they feel they are 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 poll of over 4000 students the Commission ran at the start of the pandemic, **only 50% of current undergraduates were confident about the job market.**

- 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

And students are aware of the changes 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 poll 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.

- And we've heard from students and universities that alongside traditional graduate routes, students are increasingly interested in starting their own business, or taking multiple roles in portfolio careers.

We'll be exploring these themes and others in our final report in the New Year