
Background and structure

Expanding on other Covid-19 related sector updates, and supplemented by a good practice benchmarking exercise, this paper specifically focuses on how institutions can support the undergraduate student experience and adequately plan for the future as the sector resumes (or continues to resume / increase) campus teaching. The changing student experience is first explored (section 1), followed by our suggestions to best support the student experience (section 2), and concludes with a good practice benchmarking exercise (section 3 – *Appendix A*).

1. The changing student experience

1.1 Defining the student experience

Managing current and prospective student expectations helps to mitigate risks surrounding recruitment, progression, and retention. An interconnected community feel, in addition to high quality teaching and support, is the experience students expect. The ‘fit and feel’ of a provider start well before the student arrives at the campus.

An individualised experience, tailored to academic and social pursuits will drive student choice about where to study and it is crucial that institutions are able to articulate what a student can expect (often captured in the Student Charter) from their provider. Consulting with students to understand what they value throughout their student journey will assist providers in tailoring the experiences to their student body.

1.2 The impact of the pandemic

The pandemic has modified what students may expect and, whilst it will be different, providers are working hard to ensure it is equivalent. Upskilling staff and students in the use of technologies, access to equipment and the use of virtual learning environments to promote engagement has been challenging, and there are concerns that online only learning has magnified inequalities¹ because of a lack of internet access or suitable spaces to learn for some students.

1.3 Communicating the student experience

Maintaining effective lines of communication with staff and students is key in embedding a shared understanding of student experiences and expectations. Students can feel overwhelmed if email inboxes are filled with messages from multiple sources and therefore planning when, how and from whom messages are transmitted is key in assisting students to understand, for example, the Covid rules and where to find support and guidance. Ensuring these communications are accessible and easily digestible, utilising both detailed

¹ <https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/guidance/governance/governance-and-edl/edi-challenges-higher-education/student-inequalities>

descriptions via formal communication channels (emails, webpages) alongside modern shorter snapshot messaging (via social media, videos, and infographics) will help in promulgating coherent and consistent messaging actively incorporating the student voice (further explored below) via student blogging and vlogging and enhance the student experience.

Sympathetic tone, personalisation opportunities and inclusive student friendly language ('us' and 'we' versus 'the University') help to establish a sense of community. In addition to general timeliness of communications (particularly ensuring students receive communications about assessments and teaching well in advance of important changes), helps to minimise stress and worry, and ensures when emergency messaging is sent out about unexpected changes, these messages will be read and understood by the intended recipients. Sector good practice highlights the benefits of ensuring student involvement in large scale communications. This has often been implemented via engagement with the Students' Union (SU), including, for example, SU President sign off on mass communications prior to dissemination.

1.4 The importance of the student voice

Student voice articulates the values, opinions, perspectives, and cultural backgrounds of the student body within a provider and more broadly across the sector. Providers vary in their approaches to capturing student voice but are likely to include analysis of internal and external student surveys, module and course / programme feedback, complaints and appeals, and interactions with personal tutors and support services. Student representative schemes encourage collaboration between cohorts, and the discussion of wider concerns through for example, regular meetings with senior staff, staff:student liaison committees, attendance at formal committees and attendance at external events and membership of external bodies, such as the Student Engagement Partnership (TSEP) in England, the Student Partnerships in Quality Scotland (SPARQS) and Wise Wales. Opportunities exist for students to influence policy beyond their provider through board membership at, for example, the Office for Students, Advance HE, QAA, HESA, JISC and other organisations. The pandemic has driven the use of technology to enable students to stay in touch with their cohorts and provider. Social media has proved to be an important mechanism for students to bubble up concerns and discontent about their experiences. The pandemic has highlighted the differential impacts of the pandemic on student groups (e.g. undergraduate, postgraduate taught / research students, part-time, disabled, care experienced students and students with caring responsibilities) and ensuring appropriate services are available to support them has been key in provided targeted support, advice and guidance to those groups.

1.5 Measuring the student experience

Student surveys provide qualitative and quantitative measures and indeed the OfS uses outcomes from the NSS as lead indicators to monitor provider performance. Other surveys, such as the post-graduate taught survey (PTES), post graduate research survey (PRES), UK Engagement Survey and the Student Barometer target different student groups and different aspects. It is how the provider, in consultation with its students, determines how the results from these surveys are used to drive change that makes the difference. Some institutions have introduced pandemic specific questions to their internal surveys to assist in understanding experiences and implement support.

2. What can universities do?

Expanding on our points above and guided by Advance HE's Student Engagement Conference (May 2021), we provide suggestions below to help support the student experience.

- Ensure the student experience is well defined and embedded as a core value across the institution. As this is often achieved via the Student Charter, this should be refreshed following the altered experiences of the pandemic
- Ensure students are given opportunities to actively shape change and be involved in the monitoring and evaluation of change
- Understand what students have valued / missed during the pandemic and how their experiences will shape learning, teaching and assessment practices when a return to campus happens
- Use technology to your advantage, building in flexibility and accessibility in the design and delivery of learning experiences and in building community during freshers and welcome events
- Ensure students are able to provide regular feedback through accessible student voice channels and that decision makers are feeding back their responses through these and other channels
- Work with students to determine what they value and how the provider will measure these to gauge success
- Prospective and current students have experienced significant disruption to their learning. Ensure transition modules are in place to assist them in re-engaging with their learning and in finding new ways to build communities
- Prioritise student support, particularly wellbeing, as an institutional priority. Contemplate the need for wellbeing student leadership programmes and mental health buddies
- Guarantee that intersectionality of student experiences is understood, using listening events to better understand the experiences of under-represented groups during the pandemic
- Remember the importance of support for staff who support and guide the student experience ensuring they are valued and acknowledged
- Plan ahead, making calculated assumptions and ensuring flexibility is built into contingency plans.

We can help

For further information on how we can help, such as offering student experience related audits, or for any other aspect of Uniac's internal audit and assurance service, please do get in touch. If you wish to explore a sample of our more recent briefing notes, please see our virtual brochure. This is available at: <https://uniac.co.uk/assets/brochure/>



Elly Holmes

Audit and Assurance Consultant

t: 07718111849

e: eholmes@uniac.co.uk

3. Appendix A: Good practice benchmarking activity – May 2021

We have undertaken a number of student experience related reviews over the last twelve months across our client base and we summarise below good approaches and practices.

<p>Institution A <750 students</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A key feature of their informal curriculum is an annual Student Events Board. It highlights the student social calendar of events and student-led productions which help enhance the student experience. • Wanting to improve engagement with staff in discussions and response to student feedback, a Student Voice Report was drafted which reviewed this institution's current feedback channels and provided an action plan to systematically review different areas for improvement. • Increases in engagement by student officers in student experience conversations has driven elections to champion key issues and contribute to committee discussions, running and chairing the Student Advisory Board – this has helped current students appreciate how the University is responding to their feedback.
<p>Institution B <1000 students</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In promoting a common understanding of the student experience during the pandemic, the Head of the institution provides frequent video updates for students via the webpage and virtual learning environment. These updates respond to FAQs and include information on value for money and the ways in which tuition fees are used. • The Students' Union (SU) President is heavily involved in the communications with students prior to being released to the student body. • In promoting social connections, the institution has been running online weekly drop ins for current and prospective students.
<p>Institution C <1500 students</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Virtual learning environment webpages were easy to navigate and had detailed messaging for students. Contact information for further queries was easy to find, alongside an additional covid course queries email and detailed information on how students can raise concerns if they wish to do so; sharing information with students on how they can raise concern if they have experienced changes to their student experience. • The pandemic resulted in social events moving online and these events were well received and proved to be inclusive with wider student engagement than was seen in traditional freshers' activities. Proactive messaging and beneficial reactive support from student support systems was highly praised by students during fieldwork, particularly relating to mental health, disability, and careers.
<p>Institution D ~2000 students</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All staff members interviewed mentioned consulting with student reps and / or the SU when making decisions that impact on student experience. • The SU President and student representatives have good support structures in place. The SU President has a formal link to a member of the SLT (currently the Registrar) for support, and the current post-holder is particularly effective and well-respected.
<p>Institution E >2000 students</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The institution ensures there are significant opportunities for students to get involved in representative roles, allowing for different levels of engagement about the student experience. These facilitate a focus on key aspects, such as long-term employment and digital agents. These one-off projects are often tailored towards the needs of specific students, such as those from underrepresented groups. • This institution runs an additional survey tailored to students' experiences. This provides an indication of the wider NSS questions for staff members and focuses specific feedback to the institution. • Students are involved in the writing of programme level annual reports and are asked specifically to confirm that it provides an accurate description of their student experience. The reports are formally signed off by students before being disseminated to relevant committees.