

Student Futures Commission: Creating a student futures manifesto



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Catch up

- Early 2021: issues affecting aspiring and current university students were not getting adequate attention.
- Students, their needs and their disappointments, were in danger of being “left behind” in the public debate about “catch up”.
- UPP Foundation funded, with Public First, Wonkhe, Cybil/GTI



Student futures commission

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.



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 – Chief Executive, Universities UK
- 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



Commission

- Two comprehensive polls of UK students - in May 2021 and in October 2021, undertaken for the Commission by Cibyil, 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.



Commission

- 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 evidence, 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.



Interim report

- 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.

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Students need universities to prioritise inclusion and academic confidence in the years ahead

Student Futures Commission chair Mary Curnock Cook introduces its interim report offering priorities for supporting student success post-Covid 19

COMMENT | 6/09/21



Image: Shutterstock



Mary Curnock Cook
Mary Curnock Cook OBE is chair of the UPP Foundation Student Futures Commission and a former chief executive of UCAS

Tags:
MENTAL HEALTH
STUDENT FUTURES
COMMISSION
STUDENTS
TEACHING & LEARNING

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

The first was a comment from Geoff Layer, chair of the Disabled Students' Commission, who noted that disabled students felt that the things they had been asking for over many years, but were told they couldn't have, had been delivered in days and weeks when the pandemic hit.

Disabled students too often languish at the bottom of to-do lists because the interests of the majority non-disabled students' needs tend to come first. This must change: anything we can do to make disabled students' lives easier needs to be prioritised.

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



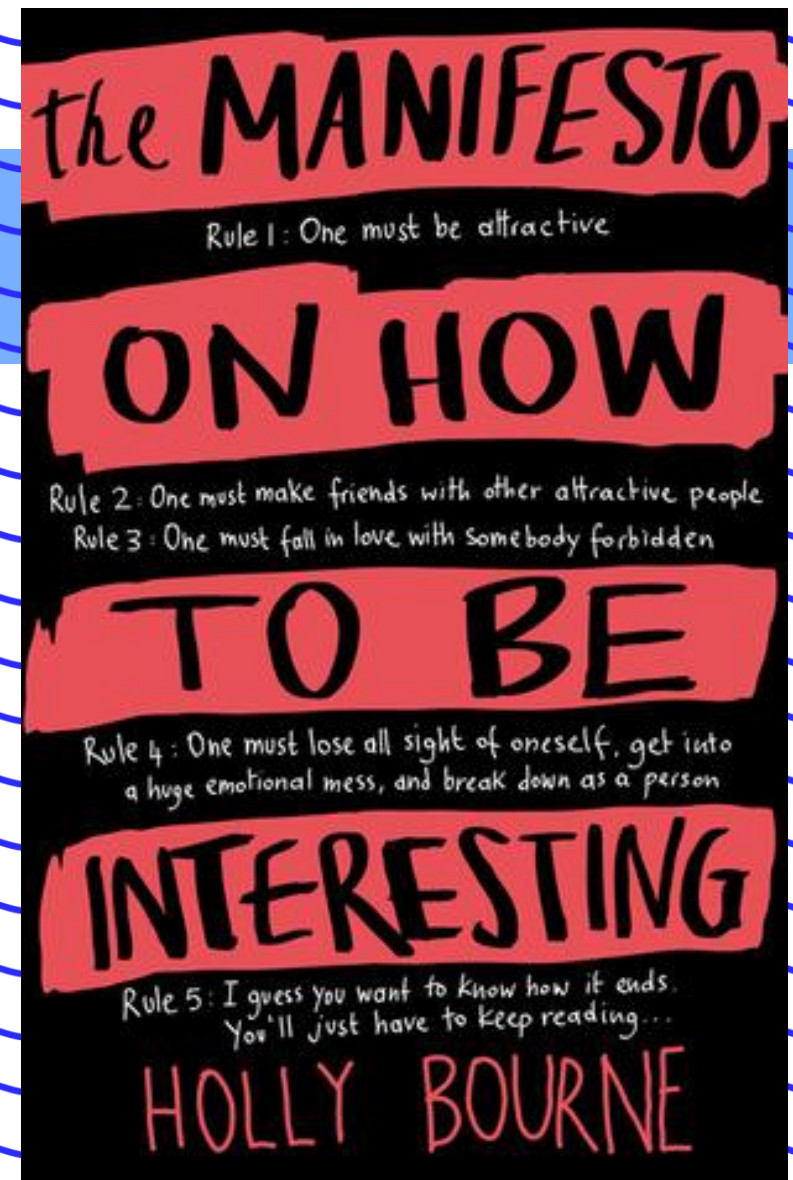
Six themes for success

1. Support for students before they reach university
2. An induction into university life for each year of study
3. Support for mental health and wellbeing
4. A clear outline of the teaching students will receive and the necessary tools to access it
5. Activities inside and outside the curriculum that build skills, networks and communities
6. A clear pathway towards graduate outcomes



Three big actions

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 institutional planning and strategy around the six anchoring themes for student success
3. Develop a communications strategy that helps explain the work they are doing across all these areas to students, parents, the wider public, media and other stakeholders.



VOICE

WHEN STUDENTS HAVE
SOMETHING TO SAY

STUDENTS TAKING
DEMOCRATIC DECISIONS

ACTIVITY

STUDENTS TAKING PART IN EXTRA-
CURRICULAR ACTIVITIES

ACTIVITY IN WHICH
STUDENTS WISH TO LEAD
ON & NEED SUPPORT

SUPPORT

WHEN STUDENTS NEED HELP

STUDENTS HELPING
OTHER STUDENTS

COMMUNITY

STUDENTS COMING TOGETHER
AS A COMMUNITY

STUDENTS AS A PART OF THE
WIDER LOCAL COMMUNITY

Three additional actions

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.

A commitment to a “what works” review of online teaching and assessment

- We recommend a nationally commissioned review is launched to establish effective online and mixed-mode pedagogy for UK higher education.

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

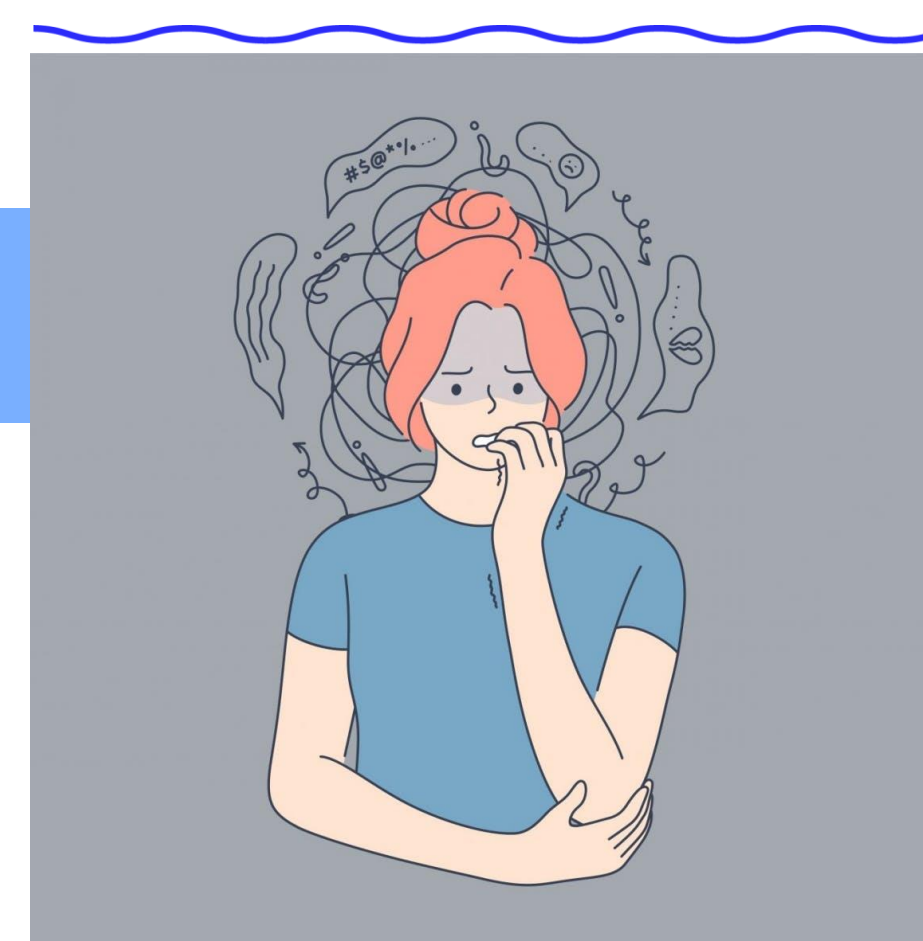
- We recommend the Office for Students establish a new challenge fund which allows universities to bid, on a flexible basis, for their specific institution and student body needs to support mental health and wellbeing.

Links to themes...

- Students' union funding for 2022 onwards
- OfS B3 exercise – belonging, confidence and skills
- OfS' TEF exercise – belonging, confidence and skills PLUS quality and NSS
- Student mental health , preparedness and readiness
- Student experience as a “theme” rather than a committee?

What is anxiety?

- Anxiety is a fear response to a perceived threat. Students become anxious about education when they view it or the environment as a threat to them.
- That may be stimulated by social and cultural experiences, which, for instance, leave students feeling marginalised, ostracised or humiliated.
- Alternatively, it may arise from a fear of failure or the perceived consequences of failure.



Why?

Four major challenges

- 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.



Solutions focus

- 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.
- But resources were stretched - and two years of ongoing uncertainty left limited capacity, energy and budget for large structural changes.

The proposal

- 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. T
- his 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.

Working together

- Collaborative
- Builds on what's there
- Identifies how to close gaps
- Significant focus on belonging and confidence
- Should embed closer working at all levels and in all parts of a university



Manifesto should

- 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 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.

1. Before university

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.”



1. Before university

In their manifesto, universities and students could 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 to build the skills students need to develop before applying to university.

1. Before university

- Could the SU play a role in the “bridge” activity – see Europe
- Are there things that can be done in the summer that go beyond ticket sales and “what to bring” – esp allowing students to meet each other and discover the campus

2. Induction every year

Transition: 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.

2. Induction every year

In their Student Futures Manifesto, universities and students could 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.

2. Induction every year

- Belonging activity crucial – what would an SU belonging strategy look like?
- Bonding social capital and bridging social capital
- Q21 Scores
- Dedicated activity for academic areas or types of student?
- Speed meets, initial challenges, regulating clubs and socs, plus toe dipping activity
- Freshers twice – inc for returners
- Making it much easier to start projects, activities

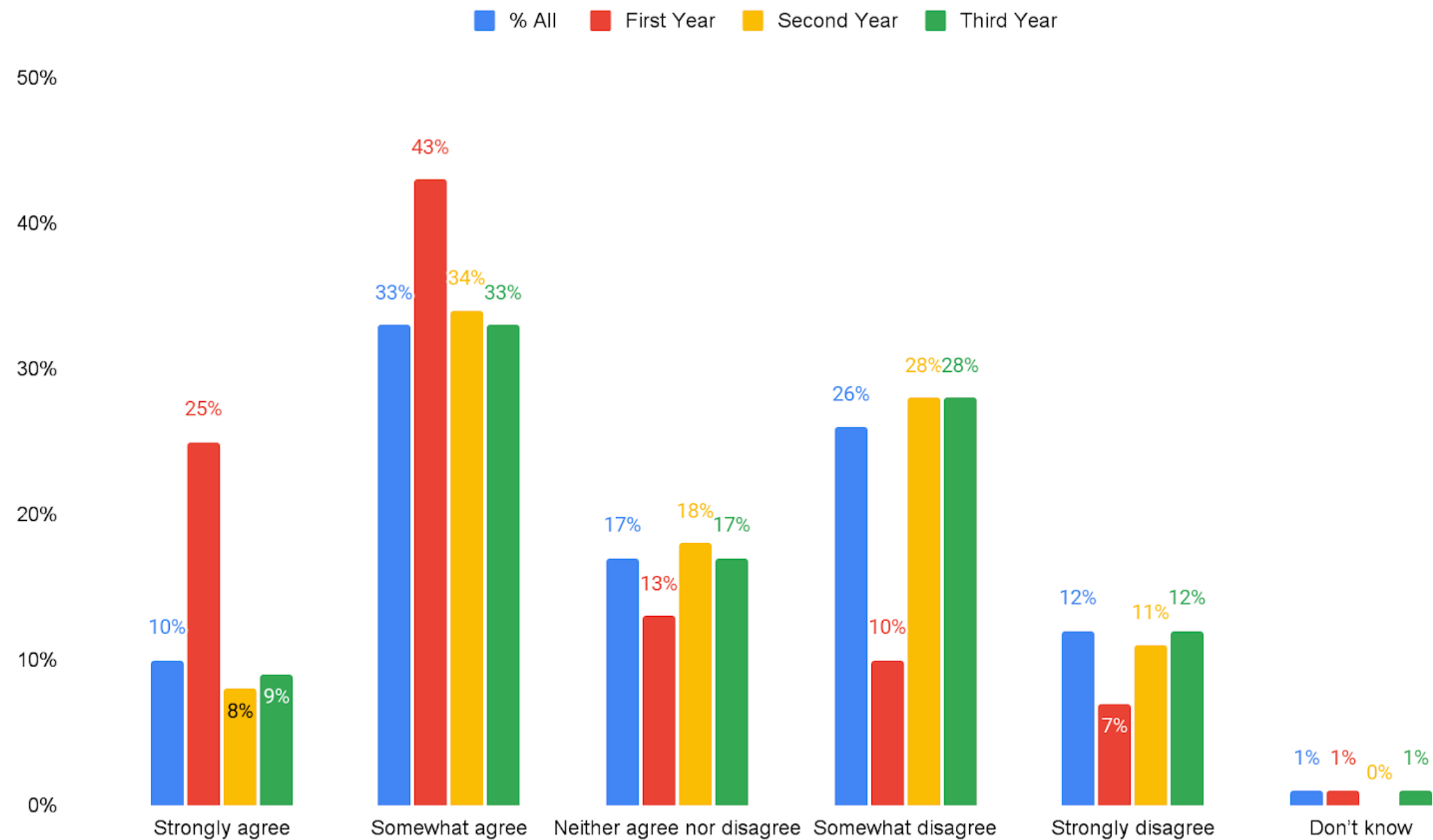
November 2021

- Half of all students polled self-reported “very high” anxiety (a score of 9 or 10 out of 10),
- Almost six in ten (58 percent) for those who attended 0 hours of in-person teaching, learning or placement in the previous week.
- 13 percent of students reported low life satisfaction (a score of 4 or below out of 10), increasing to 19 percent for those attending 0 hours.
- This group also reported higher levels of loneliness.



3. Mental health and wellbeing

To what extent do you agree with the following statement: "my university has given me all the support I need to prepare for the start of term"?



3. Mental health and wellbeing

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

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

3. Mental health and wellbeing

- Links to the UMHC
- Activities the SU would run
- Things the union wants to see in terms of wellbeing services
- Credit bearing or compulsory dedicated non-subject content
- Extra curricular
- Wider community issues and activities
- Services and facilities
- How programmes are delivered, taught and assessed

4. Teaching outline

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

- How they will ensure students have visibility of the teaching and learning methods for their course, and what the benefits of those methods are.
- 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.
- A new digital skills plan as part of a transition support package.

5. Skills, networks, communities

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

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

5. Skills, networks, communities

- More activities?
- Events and projects as well as groups
- Activities that allow dipping throughout the year
- Activities more directly organised
- Events support?
- Community development work?
- Academic societies?

6. Pathway to outcomes

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

- 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.
- 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.
- A programme of work-related learning such as through a formal placement or internship, or service learning, which the university facilitates.
- 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.

Implementation...

- Secure commitment/pledge to taking part
- Work on process to ensure SU partner in governing the project
- Activities to create the manifesto:
 - Analysing the current “offer” in each area
 - Students for evaluation and creativity
 - A role for the SU in delivery (with resourcing)

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