

Bullet version of opening

Secret Life of Students 2025: Opening Address / New Vision

COVID Impact and Background

Last week was the anniversary of when everyone went on Zoom in 2020
SU officers questioned why campuses were at 30% capacity while halls remained at 100%
The cynical answer was money - universities needed to fill halls for financial targets
The autumn was bleak with students locked in temporary housing for weeks
Students were told to stay for the entire term, then not to return after Christmas, but still pay rent
There was almost total focus on provision rather than students' lives
Students weren't allowed on campus, weren't allowed to mix, and weren't allowed to work
Independent study became nearly impossible

Rethinking Higher Education

Challenge to think differently about higher education
Make education richer and deeper rather than breaking it into cheaper, faster parts
Reimagine the full-time experience so students do better and get better

Being Full-Time

The future of higher education is not about unbundling and fragments
Students now live in an "extended middle stage" with different economic realities
Markers of adulthood happen much later now, especially for graduates
The research shows five elements in this stage: identity exploration, instability, self-focus, feeling in-between, and optimism
University provides structure, community, and guided independence during transition
Demand for full-time study remains strong despite predictions after COVID
UK students go to university earlier and graduate quicker than most OECD countries
Students are rushed through degrees with little flexibility for their diversity, life events, health issues, or need to earn money
This contributes to some of the worst mental health statistics in Europe

System Contradictions

We say "full-time study" but most students work during term just to survive
Disabled students get extra time in exams but must finish degrees at the same pace
International students are recruited without sufficient housing
Widening access systems still favor those with cultural advantage

Personal Experience

Story about starting university in 1995 and feeling out of place
Posh students talking about gap years while speaker worked in a shoe shop
Not knowing how to take notes, what to pack for field trips, or how to approach assignments

Unwritten rules create deep gaps in experience and results
Today students arrive with more diverse preparation than ever

University Preparation

Universities define what graduates should be like but don't define skills needed to navigate university

40% of students feel like impostors in higher education

Current efforts overwhelm students with information instead of building skills

Other countries have better systems: Poland, Finland, Slovakia all have more comprehensive student support

UK approaches remain scattered, treating orientation as an event instead of a process

Student Skills Framework

Need a framework covering student skills including rights and responsibilities, learning approaches, subject foundations, assessment understanding, cultural awareness, campus resources, wellbeing, and independent living

This framework should be credit-bearing, partly assessed, include a probation period, involve pre-arrival polling, and be partly student-owned

It should help every student identify what they don't know and need to know

Time Poverty

Student disengagement isn't about apathy but time poverty

As costs rise, students work more hours and commute longer distances

Traditional timetables become impossible and attendance drops

Students working over 15 hours weekly are 65% more likely to feel they don't "belong"

They're 47% more likely to feel lonely and 71% more likely to consider dropping out

Block teaching offers an interesting alternative

The challenge is to adapt structures to students' economic and social reality

Financial Reality

Maximum maintenance loan is £10,227 while median living costs are nearly £19,000

Minimum wage for 30 weeks will be £13,376 - more than the poorest students can borrow

In 2007, about one-third of English students got maximum maintenance support; today only one in five do

Middle-income families now have to find £4,000 a year in parental contribution

Every aspect of student finance needs review

Student Work

Students work primarily to pay for rent and food, not for extra money

27% of advantaged students work more than 15 hours weekly; for less advantaged students, that figure is 71%

Nearly one in five home students and 27% of international students face hour-long commutes

Almost half of working students deal with zero-hours contracts
Other European countries have better approaches - Slovenia has student employment agencies, Germany offers special contracts, France has better tax arrangements
Every university needs a student employment strategy, SUs should be funded to help students find work, and academic credit should be given for learning while working

Student Support and Community

UK has a higher proportion of professional services staff than most other OECD countries
Growing professionalization of student support may have backed us into a corner
Peer support, student-led communities, and civic engagement have unique educational value
When students support other students, satisfaction with university support increases
This communitarian model becomes more important as AI automates traditional academic work
AI challenges traditional assessment and is a chance to refocus education on human capacities
Need more interdisciplinary work, applied work, project work, and problem-oriented work
The degree classification system needs scrapping

Student Representation and Power

European universities have different approaches to student representation
In the UK, student reps attend meetings but can't make decisions
In Europe, fewer reps sit on bodies with real governance power
UK course representation is increasingly mismatched with how universities actually run
European universities usually have department-level student associations
At Helsinki University, student reps interpret data to help make strategic decisions
In Austria, students sign off on electives for the following year
Module evaluation should be compulsory and include self-reflection
European campus-level ombuds systems work better than the UK's

Safeguarding Students

Safeguarding is about systematic protection of students from harm
Currently it's "30 different agendas with 40 different leads at 10 different levels"
There is no definable duty of care for students
Sweden brought students under the same health and safety laws as employees in the 1970s
Australia's quality body brings safeguarding together in their Domain 2 standards
In the UK, guidance is fragmented across multiple organizations

Professional Standards

Other sectors have clear regulatory frameworks for professional conduct
Higher education teaching has no external professional body to investigate misconduct
Without external bodies, students rely on provider procedures that prioritize reputation
Need a statutory duty of care, professional standards for teaching, systematic risk assessment, and clear protocols banning staff-student relationships

Student Health

Student health often falls into an accountability gap

Beyond mental health, students face rising STI rates, substance use problems, disordered eating, sleep deprivation, limited dental care, and nutritional gaps

Only 58% of students report good or very good health compared to over 80% nationally

A quarter of students report worsened health since starting university

27% struggle to get GP appointments and 31% are unsure if they're registered with a dentist

21% get less than 6 hours of sleep a night

Other countries collect data through national student health surveys

South Africa has developed a systematic approach through mandatory health modules

Priorities should include dual GP registration, free prescriptions, and recognition of student health as an educational issue

Housing and Community

University towns rely on students economically

Office workers and shoppers have been replaced by students in cluster flats

Many student accommodations lack social spaces

Local city plans often fail to reference student communities

Students are "othered" by local authorities

Need better housing rights and proper planning in every city with students

Student Contribution

Old images showed elite students training for leadership and students doing fundraising

Today's portrayal of students skews negative

During COVID, students made sacrifices to protect the vulnerable

Propose formally recognizing time students spend contributing to communities through credits

Students could earn 10 ECTS credits annually through structured contributions

This makes contribution part of the degree, not extra to it

It legitimizes time spent on activities beyond coursework

Students can engage without academic guilt or career anxiety

Their contributions enhance the community while developing key competencies

Student Rights

UK has the highest fees in Europe and the worst baseline student rights

Students should expect:

The right to a fair start and to know how to be a student

The right to meaningful connections

The right to access basic needs centers

The right to assessment that matters and study choice

The right to real influence and financial dignity

The right to proper information on costs

The right to fair employment

The right to be considered by every government department

Legal protection and rapid adjudication

The right to affordable, safe housing near campus

A formal legal status as a student

Vision for the Future

A new government focused on access and student success within regional growth

A vision that sees all aspects of students' lives and addresses fundamental challenges

Funding models that reflect actual student needs rather than outdated assumptions

Structures that fit students' complex lives

"Doing better and getting better" means helping students help themselves