

Doing better, getting better

Introduction

UK higher education faces significant challenges balancing its globally respected reputation with financial pressures. While some predict the unbundling of higher education, the full-time three-year degree remains in demand. This report offers a vision for student experience that acknowledges all dimensions of students' lives—learning, work, and health.

Approach

- **Rights-based framing:** Shifting from what universities "provide" to what students should expect
- **Championing the full-time experience:** Arguing for reinvestment in traditional university education
- **Tackling contradictions:** Addressing systemic contradictions (e.g., "full-time" students working, disability accommodations)
- **Looking beyond borders:** Learning from successful international models
- **Time as critical resource:** Recognizing time constraints as more limiting than financial ones
- **Rebalancing responsibilities:** Enabling students to do more for themselves and each other
- **Communitarian model:** Recognizing both individual development and community building

1. Why? The Extended Middle Stage

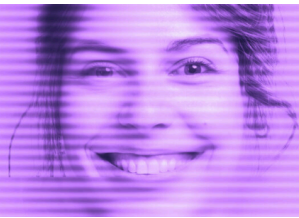
- Traditional markers of adulthood (marriage, parenthood, homeownership) have shifted dramatically upward in age
- Jeffrey Arnett characterizes this stage through identity exploration, instability, self-focus, feeling in-between, and optimism
- This extended developmental period creates tensions with educational approaches pushing early career specialization
- Global demand for full-time university education (projected 380 million students by 2030) reflects the value of structured yet flexible environments

2. Becoming a Student

- **Key Challenge:** Getting into university doesn't mean readiness for it
- 4 in 10 students experience imposter syndrome in higher education
- **Recommendations:**
 - Develop a universal student attribute framework
 - Create credit-bearing first-year development programs
 - Provide structured guidance on academic, social, and practical competencies
 - Ensure meaningful social and professional connections

3. Human

- AI is challenging traditional assessments and raising questions about the value of academic skills



- **Recommendations:**
 - Prioritize fewer, richer, process-driven assessments
 - Develop clear and consistent AI policies across disciplines
 - Design programs that accommodate students' time pressures
 - Embed AI literacy and ethics into curricula
 - Enable interdisciplinary pathways and project-based learning

4. Partnership and Power

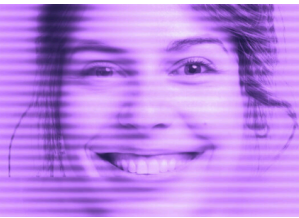
- UK universities typically have thousands of course reps while continental systems place fewer representatives directly on decision-making bodies
- Course reps report being in "the wrong room"—attending meetings where actual decisions aren't made
- **Recommendations:**
 - Integrate student reps into program steering groups and councils
 - Replace outdated course rep models with structures aligned with university decision-making
 - Provide training in data analysis and policy engagement
 - Establish independent campus ombuds roles
 - Compensate student reps financially or through academic credit

5. Money

- Parental earnings threshold has remained frozen at £25,000 since 2008 (if properly updated, would be around £36,500)
- Maximum maintenance loan (£10,227) falls short of median living costs (approximately £18,888)
- National Living Wage at 37.5 hours per week for 30 weeks will soon be £13,376—approximately £2,832 more than most students can borrow
- **Recommendations:**
 - Set maintenance loans based on real median living costs
 - Raise means-tested maintenance threshold to at least £36,500
 - Replace the £1-for-£1 Universal Credit deduction with the standard 55p taper rate
 - Increase postgraduate maintenance support
 - Protect university hardship funds and bursaries

6. Work

- 77% of students work during term-time
- Over 15 hours weekly work: 27% from advantaged backgrounds vs. 71% from disadvantaged backgrounds
- Nearly 50% of working students are on zero-hours contracts
- 25% regularly work unpaid extra hours; 25% experience workplace accidents or injuries
- **Recommendations:**
 - Create fair, structured, student-friendly university employment
 - Award ECTS credit for demonstrable learning from work experience
 - End unpaid professional placements
 - Develop student-specific employment protections based on European models



- Establish government-backed student-led employment agencies

7. Time

- Over 4 in 10 students live more than 5 miles from campus (rising to 6 in 10 for those living at home)
- Students working over 15 hours weekly report not "belonging," feeling lonely, and considering dropping out
- **Recommendations:**
 - Shift from scattered sessions to structured, intensive teaching blocks
 - Explore block teaching models
 - Set fair guidelines on part-time work hours and commuting distances
 - Expand campus nap areas, social learning hubs, and on-campus jobs

8. Protection

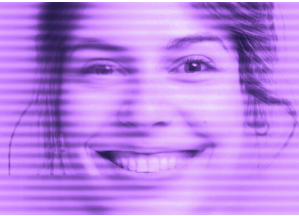
- Universities lack sophisticated safeguarding frameworks despite being charities
- The concept of "duty of care" remains contested, as shown in the Natasha Abraham case
- Unlike medical professionals, university staff face no professional standards regulation
- **Recommendations:**
 - Introduce a Student Rights Bill establishing legal student status
 - Create a statutory duty of care for universities
 - Establish a sector-wide safeguarding framework
 - Develop a professional standards body for misconduct oversight
 - Create a statutory university ombuds with enforcement powers

9. Place

- Student rental costs increased 14.6% over two academic years across ten key UK markets
- International postgraduate students doubled in major UK cities (21,035 to 42,215 between 2020-2022)
- European initiatives: Ireland's €434 million for student beds, Netherlands' plan for 60,000 affordable homes, Germany's €500 million "Junges Wohnen"
- **Recommendations:**
 - Align PBSA protections with standard housing laws
 - Cap student rents at a fixed percentage of maintenance loans
 - Allow early tenancy termination for valid reasons
 - Ban excessive advance rent payments and discriminatory practices
 - Repurpose vacant properties into student hubs
 - Establish fast-track housing complaint resolution

10. Community

- Student-community relationships have evolved with higher education expansion
- Students consistently cite service and connection as primary motivations for volunteering
- As AI advances reduce effort needed for academic outputs, institutions face choices about how to use "saved" time



- **Recommendations:**
 - Allow students to earn 10-15 ECTS credits annually in community service roles
 - Measure and foster "bonding," "bridging," and "linking" social capital
 - Invest in student-facing community organizers
 - Reinvest AI-driven efficiencies into human connection
 - Set institutional goals for student bonding and integration

11. Health and Harm

- Students face serious health challenges including record gonorrhoea diagnoses, drug issues, disordered eating, nutritional deficiencies
- Finland's Student Health Service (YTHS) offers an alternative integrated model
- Eight-year backlogs exist for adult ADHD assessments across much of the UK
- **Recommendations:**
 - Introduce dual GP registration systems
 - Provide free prescriptions for students
 - Create faster disability diagnostic pathways
 - Develop dedicated regional NHS strategies for students
 - Coordinate subsidized, low-cost student meals (£3 meal deals)
 - Introduce a national student health and wellbeing survey

12. Paying for It

- European institutions demonstrate more flexible curricula enabling cost efficiencies
- University of Maynooth maintains a 28.5:1 staff-student ratio while sustaining specialisms through a liberal arts system
- **Recommendations:**
 - Create a transparent funding framework separating teaching, research, student support, and capital investment
 - Reintroduce a structured dual-sector system
 - Offer modular, extended study options
 - Share responsibility for student welfare between universities and government
 - Develop a national subject strategy to prevent vital discipline cuts
 - Create a ministerial student policy unit embedding students in national civic initiatives