Higher Education Policy Institute

The future of the campus university: 10 trends that will change higher education

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This publication constitutes the final report of the first Department for Education Higher Education Student Support Champion and the team that has worked with him. We hope it gives you food for thought. We would like to acknowledge and appreciate all the conversations with and contributions from innumerable colleagues and students from across the sector that have informed its contents. Its inaccuracies and idiosyncrasies remain entirely our own.

Introduction

Change is a facet of life. Without the benefit of hindsight, there is a temptation for each generation to attribute unique significance to the changes they see in their lifetime. Nonetheless, perhaps the pace of change has accelerated in recent times; perhaps we are experiencing major shifts in technology, politics, global economics and social attitudes. As a result, we may well be wondering what the future holds for higher education in England.

No one can predict the future accurately. We are not attempting to do so here. This piece should be read as a collection of friendly prompts rather than firm predictions: it is constructed around 10 trends that we hope invite thought, discussion and student-centred innovation.

Our experiences of working with higher education providers, sector agencies, students and many other stakeholders since the summer of 2022 have given us the confidence to extrapolate from already established or emergent trends, many of which overlap in their nature and consequences, and to bring them together to consider a possible future for the campus university. This model of education has survived the introduction of printing, the expansion that has made it one of the mainstays of contemporary life across the world, and the internet, with its potential for online provision to replace it. All this suggests that the current model offers value to individuals and to society that could see it continue to thrive in the age of generative AI. Nevertheless, as with previous innovations, this long-established approach to higher education will need to keep on adapting in order to flourish.

With this in mind, we propose in this short paper that higher education's unique selling point to students – and to those with a broader interest in its role – is seeing the campus-based learning experience shifting away from its historical focus on the conveyance of academic content. Rather, in future, it will focus on the curation of programmes that enable professional, vocational and personal development, just as much as the intellectual enrichment, of students.

As a result, the provision of broadly defined student support will become a primary, rather than a secondary, focus. In other words, what have in the past been viewed as support, co-curricular or extra-curricular activities will move into the mainstream as core aspects of the value of a degree. Academic awards will focus as much on the development of employment and generic skills as the acquisition and retention of specific knowledge. This could sustain, and perhaps increase, the appetite for the face-to-face engagement that has been the distinctive feature of higher education for over a thousand years.

Such a shift will necessitate a rethink of the skills that are required of staff in higher education, both within academic departments and across professional services. Long-held assumptions about priorities, structures and processes may be challenged as the emphasis on the quality of customer service becomes central.

Furthermore, this reorientation will need to take place as the English higher education sector adjusts its business model to the new financial context. While we do not underestimate the scale of this adjustment, we postulate that over time the view presented here may help generate innovative approaches with both immediate and future benefits.

Finally, we do not seek to propose a neat and tidy method for providers to navigate their way through these trends. At most, for those who are in a position to do so, we recommend that the Advance HE Student Needs Framework provides one approach to undertaking a comprehensive review of student support that will help higher education providers in addressing both current and future challenges.[1]

1. The impact of technology on the curriculum

The arrival and continued development of generative AI make knowledge not only ubiquitous but also personalised, allowing a pre-defined subject area to be explored freely and explained without direct guidance from a tutor. Developments in this technology will lead to personalised learning and customised assessment for each student. It is plausible to envisage bespoke courses of study where students follow their own interests – possibly starting and finishing over a time period they decide – within more or less stringent parameters.

These developments will change the role of academic staff in the design and delivery of learning, teaching and assessment. It will steer their role away from imparting understanding of knowledge derived from their own research or scholarship. It will move them more towards creating curricula that prioritise higher order thinking skills, such as complex analysis, real-world application and critical thinking. Over time, AI will challenge current assumptions about the essential information and attributes that graduates require to pursue their chosen careers. The ability to recall and / or synthesise knowledge may no longer be as important to employers, whereas understanding the limitations of, and ethical considerations around, generative AI may become essential.[2]

These reshaped curricula may also include an enhanced emphasis on emerging core strengths for the future world, such as facilitating collaboration, exercising judgement and reconciling diverse perspectives.[3] Students will need to develop the agency to take ownership of their learning, make informed decisions and actively shape their future.[4] While some of these skills can be developed independently, many are best enabled by, or actively rely on, face-to-face contact within a learning community.

It has often been assumed that the acquisition of many of these skills takes place outside of the classroom or laboratory, through students engaging in co-curricular or extra-curricular activities. For some, this is true, but for many, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds, it may not be. Given their growing importance, the development of these attributes can no longer be left to chance. These skills will need to be integrated into the curriculum and be assessed and credit-bearing. In due course, they may replace significant portions of the current subject content within programmes.

2. The impact of technology on student support

Current student learning analytics systems can identify students at risk of disengagement, enabling early interventions from academics and wider student support services.[5] In the future, the use of generative AI and predictive analytics will enable more automated support and intervention.

Generative AI will not replace the roles of specialist student support staff. There may be both safety and ethical concerns around the use of AI in some settings.[6] Nevertheless, it will have a major role to play in recognising students who are vulnerable or in distress. In some areas AI will respond to these needs; for example, offering

personalised self-guided support for low mood. It could prove to be an efficient and effective way to provide virtual assistance to some students, for example, to aid students who have ADHD.[7] The use of student analytics at scale also offers opportunities to support workforce and resource planning within student support services.[8]

As the demand for student support increases and expectations of providers to deliver this support intensifies, and as data-informed support becomes more sophisticated, institutions will need systems that can synthesise data from across the organisation to generate actionable insight on students' support needs. Conversely, if institutions lack the capability and capacity to act on student data they possess, collect, or generate, they face risks that have been well established in recent case law.[9]

The present proliferation of systems that can generate a complete picture of students' academic support needs will require greater collaboration between different departments in the delivery of the student learning experience. To leverage fully the opportunities for support this may unlock, higher education providers may need to adapt their organisational culture and design and implement changes to staff development to ensure colleagues have the confidence and competence to act on the data that institutions possess.

3. The impact of student expectations of technology use in learning and teaching

The continued development of digital learning methods, which accelerated during the COVID pandemic, has raised student expectations about digital provision in both secondary and higher education. Students now expect and make extensive use of a range of digital resources to support their learning, and they may demand these are provided through a single intuitive platform.[10] While generative AI is already used widely by many students, there remain issues of equitable access.[11]

As Generation Alpha enters higher education these expectations will continue to evolve. This digital-native generation already exhibit high use of digital devices. They show a preference for visually engaging formats delivered on mobile devices, including short-form videos (such as TikTok), dynamic animations, gamified learning modules and augmented reality experiences.[12] These digital formats offer immediate, personalised feedback and allow for the quick consumption of bite-sized content.

Many online providers of higher education are meeting these expectations. Campus-based institutions need to match them across all spheres of their activity; this cannot be left to the lottery of the enthusiasm and experience of local course teams. Professional services will play an increasingly significant role in programme design and delivery, in ways that initially may be perceived as countercultural.

At the same time, campus universities will have to find ways to maintain and to demonstrate the benefits of some traditional methods of learning. They will need to show students that essential skills to thrive in an AI world are best learned face-to-face. The continued popularity of libraries as proper places to study – even when most of the resources being consulted are online – suggests that being physically present in a place of collective endeavour is still important. Meaningful rituals, such as matriculation and graduation, may grow ever more important as moments of social solidarity and shared experience.[13] Indeed, course designers may look to construct more of these interactions as compulsory – and credit-bearing – components of their programmes.

More speculatively, it cannot be assumed that the current trajectory of growing centrality of new technology in the lives of young people will be maintained; already there are small signs of some of them stepping away.[14] Campus-based higher education providers will need to remain alert to what may be relatively rapid shifts in students' perceptions of the benefits of this technology.

4. The impact of student expectations about support

Globally, there are signs that Generation Alpha has missed key opportunities for social and emotional learning. This may in part be due to the COVID-19 pandemic, but possibly more likely because of a high usage of social media. This finding is reinforced by the observations of secondary school teachers who express concern about their pupils' social and communication skills.[15] Screen use has also been linked to a range of harms among young people, including poorer mental and physical health and impact on brain function, leading to a need for increased wellbeing and disability support.[16]

Secondary education in the UK has seen a heightened focus on student wellbeing over recent years. Mental health and wellbeing support in UK primary and secondary schools, including Mental Health Support Teams, has been rolled out over recent years with positive results.[17] Social and emotional learning programmes have been

shown to improve attitudes towards self and others, school bonding, positive social behaviour, conduct problems, emotional distress and academic performance.[18] Some learners will have been the subject of – and may have participated in – the development of detailed plans to support their learning. As these pupils move on to higher education they will expect to benefit from a similar focus on their wellbeing, including within the curriculum.[19]

Meanwhile, digital innovations are reshaping learning environments around the world. Schools that combine technology with tailored support are cultivating a generation that values interactive and emotionally nurturing experiences.[20] These early experiences not only boost academic achievement but also set high expectations for dynamic, responsive support in university settings. As today's secondary and primary school pupils enrol in higher education, UK institutions will come under pressure to offer integrated, holistic support systems that mirror the effective strategies already in place during their earlier schooling.

The opportunity for universities is that these young people will come to higher education with expectations of many of these interventions taking place face-to-face on campus. The downside may become evident in institutional continuation rates if their expectations are not fulfilled. Student support services have a crucial role in ensuring that they are.

5. The impact of student regionality

The Robbins Report of 1963 enshrined the principle, backed by the student maintenance structure, that a residential higher education experience had clear benefits for students' learning and overall development. Many students still follow this model and demand for student housing remains high. Nonetheless, there has been a trend over recent years towards UK-domiciled students attending a higher education provider nearer to home.

Not all of these students should be classified as 'commuter students'. They may live near or on campus during all or some of their time at university, but have chosen an institution within their home region. In 2023, the median drive time from their previous home address to campus for UK-based 18-year-olds was 68 minutes, with 49% of students remaining in their home region.

This evolving trend has a number of drivers: reductions in the real value of the student maintenance loan over the last decade; increases in the cost of living; continued access to local support and professional services; and the need to do paid work during term time.[21]

Over time, higher education providers across the whole of the sector will need to adjust to the fact their campus is not – and probably never was – the primary focus of every student's life. Securing the affiliation of local students, whose focus in part may be elsewhere, may require a considerable change of assumptions and practices. This is crucial if the benefits identified by Robbins are to be available equitably to all students.

Personal and vocational skills development, which will become increasingly core to the student experience, will need to be delivered as part of the curriculum on a basis that fits around students' other commitments. In some cases, this may be achieved through mobilising a network of partners, as students pursue their personalised programmes of study with the connection between campus and communities perhaps becoming more important.

At the same time, a greater proportion of students coming to campus from regional schools and colleges could help to embed general pre-enrolment activities as part of a structured transition to a specific university, much as the preparation for the move from primary to secondary education is planned. Such arrangements could also open up the possibility of much greater sharing of information between 16-19 education and higher education that will enable (with the students' and agencies' consent) much more individualised approaches to pre-arrival and on-campus induction activities.

6. The impact of the expectations of society

While 18 is still the legal age of adulthood in the UK, the concept of being an adult is both complex and subjective and may be considered as a process that occurs over time; psychologists have theorised a distinct period of 'emerging adulthood' between 18 to 29.[22] Over the last two generations, in advanced economies, key adult milestones such as getting married, having children, buying a house and starting a stable career are taking place at a later average age and in a wider variety of different forms.[23] Childhood and adulthood do not represent a simple binary, rather adulthood is a concept shaped by society's expectations of maturity and responsibility.

These findings are supported by developments in neuroscience which show that brain development continues well into the mid-20s, with critical changes taking place in areas responsible for decision-making and impulse control. This prolonged maturation period affects behaviour, emotional regulation and risk assessment, suggesting that the transition to full adulthood be understood as an extended process rather than a fixed age threshold.[24]

Most students attend university in the earliest part of their emerging adulthood phase. It appears that wider society is developing a view that higher education should be more protective of them. This is evident in the petition which prompted a debate in parliament on the creation of a legal statutory duty of care to students for universities.[25] The Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) has clarified the legal requirement of universities to identify and respond to disabilities.[26] The Office for Students has brought in a new requirement for universities to protect students from sexual misconduct and harassment, accompanied by a survey seeking to establish its prevalence.[27]

This trend is putting student support front and centre of the public debate about higher education. The good news is that, for many parts of society, the campus is still seen as a safer place than other settings for young people to mature. However, there are increasing consequences for providers that fail to meet these expectations. This underlines again the fundamental importance of student support, once an auxiliary function in higher education but which is rapidly becoming a key component of its offer in the minds of many stakeholders.

7. The impact of students as customers

It has been argued persuasively that the introduction of the 2012 fee regime shifted universities from being mostly a story about public policy to one that focuses on the customer experience.[28] There has been a longstanding debate about whether higher education represents good value for government and taxpayers; of course, this strand of debate continues.[29] More often the argument in consumer media now is about whether universities are a worthwhile investment of money and time for students themselves; sometimes the answer is no, notwithstanding the arguments of the proponents of its benefits.[30]

The rise in tuition fees from £3,375 to £9,000 in 2012 marked a significant financial peak for universities, only to see the erosion of this level of resource ever since. With hindsight, perhaps 2012 constituted the moment the sector had the opportunity to embrace a customer service ethos wholeheartedly, because that was what students, their parents and the commentariat would come to expect from this model and level of funding.

These expectations underpin the mass legal action being pursued by students in the wake of disruptions to teaching caused by COVID-19 and industrial action in the early 2020s. It lies behind parental concerns about contact hours over the past decade. It explains the repetition in parts of the media that students are saddling themselves with large amounts of debt while not receiving the boost to their careers and their earning potential they were promised.

The most powerful possible response from providers is to demonstrate that every interaction with students contributes positively to their experience. In other words, always putting the interests of the customer first. This may not only be an issue of capacity but also of culture. This is far from straightforward, but it is deliverable.

Consider 'Compassionate Communication', the set of principles developed by the Higher Education Mental Health Implementation Taskforce and published by the Academic Registrars' Council. To put it into practice requires painstaking mapping of all interactions with students.[31] For most institutions, this represents a significant change initiative. Nevertheless, it exemplifies the adoption of a customer orientation that delivers clear benefits for graduates and an appropriate balance between providing a nurturing environment and helping students develop sufficient resilience to thrive in the modern world. The positive reception of Compassionate Communication shows that providers are becoming increasingly attuned to the importance of making each encounter with their students as positive as it can be.

8. The impact of the changing labour market

AI and automation may lead to momentous change in the workforce and the workplace over the coming decade. Their use is likely to reduce the need for administrative, process-based technical roles and customer service jobs. Roles in healthcare and STEM will be needed in larger numbers.[32] A people-centred industrial strategy may also place greater emphasis on interdisciplinary capability within the workforce.[33] As noted

earlier, the so-called 'soft' skills – creative thinking, critical analysis and social and emotional skills – will be in higher demand; there are already signs of existing gaps in some of these areas.[34]

Further changes are already discernible. The working environment itself has changed rapidly in many occupations since the start of the pandemic, and remote working (or 'teleworking') has stabilised at a higher level across Europe, especially in higher skilled occupations.[35] Technological and social change over the coming years may accelerate flexible forms of employment and working practices; for example, a further rise in self-employment, which has been on an overall upward trend in the UK since the millennium.[36] Among younger workers, the traditional relationship between employer and employee is transforming, leading to a stronger focus on individual skills rather than employment history, and requiring more entrepreneurial and, indeed, resilient characteristics.[37]

The scale and pace of these developments mean that significant reforms to secondary and tertiary education, and to lifelong learning, will be required to meet skills gaps. Coaching, mentoring, placements and extra-curricular activities will take up more of students' time, designed and delivered by academic and professional services colleagues working in close collaboration. In many cases, they will become credit-bearing. Overall, every interaction with students will be seen as having the potential to contribute to students' personal and vocational development and to ready them for the future workforce.

9. The impact of changing student demographics

The UK 18-year-old population is predicted to rise to a peak of over 850,000 by 2030 before declining to approximately 2024 levels by 2040.[38] Of course, demand for higher education also depends on the percentage of young people who enrol, which grew steadily for 20 years but now shows signs of stalling, and is declining among young people from the most financially disadvantaged backgrounds.[39] In these circumstances, the actual and perceived attractiveness and affordability of campus-based institutions becomes paramount, both in absolute terms and relative to alternatives like online providers and apprenticeship schemes.

As the number of school leavers drops, there will be increased incentive for universities to recruit more older learners, continuing a recent trend. Between 2018 and 2023 the number of mature students in UK universities rose from 150,265 to 192,560, with a 65% growth in students aged 30 or over; part-time mature undergraduate numbers rose a more modest 5%.[40] The former trend may have plateaued recently, but there is potential for modular provision under the Lifelong Learning Entitlement to drive further part-time enrolments.

This policy initiative holds the potential to change the conception of what access to and participation in higher education means. Learners of all ages who engage in Level 4 and 5 courses or modules will have the same access to loans for fees and maintenance as full-time undergraduates. This will start to address longstanding government and employers concerns about the large numbers of people whose education stopped at Level 3.

The volatility in international student recruitment to the UK shows the unpredictability that arises from changing geopolitical landscapes, including changing immigration regimes, evolving economic conditions and demographic transitions.[41] This change may see traditional markets such as China and India stagnate or even decline, while emerging (albeit smaller) markets, such as those in parts of Africa and Asia, could become more prominent.

A more diverse student body brings with it a wide range of needs, both as cohorts and as individuals, that providers must address. Perceptions of international students before they apply – that UK universities are superior in academic delivery but poorer in student experience – are salutary.[42] So is their focus on providers' employability credentials. Paying attention to the views of these applicants – who have the most choice of all – points to the availability of appropriate and inclusive student support becoming more significant in every applicant's decision.[43]

10. The impact of regulation

Though it is a relatively new arrival in English higher education, independent regulation has become a common feature of the landscape for most sectors that receive significant amounts of public funding, or where their behaviour has major implications for the public. Inevitably, regulation designed to promote the interests of students must concern itself with the quality of institutional support they receive across all of their experiences.

The focus of a higher education regulator with this remit will naturally seek to address the issues being raised by politicians, public, parents, media, students and higher education providers themselves, and which underpin the other nine trends described here. In doing so, it will require higher education providers to pay due attention to the effective implementation of interventions that maximise student benefit and minimise the potential for harm. It is important to recognise that many of these interventions originate in higher education themselves, as is the case with Compassionate Communication.

Most higher education providers do not need much prompting to adopt them when they become aware of the benefits. Others may wish to avoid regulatory attention. A small number may require regulatory action. Whichever scenario is the case, the presence of regulation provides further impetus for student support to become a primary task of higher education providers.

About the authors

Professor Edward Peck CBE DL FAcSS PhD joined Nottingham Trent University as Vice-Chancellor and President in August 2014. The university educates over 35,000 students and employs circa 4,500 staff across six campuses. Previously, he worked at the University of Birmingham as Pro Vice-Chancellor and Head of the College of Social Sciences. His early career was spent in the NHS where he led a national initiative to create community mental health services and close Victorian asylums. His academic interests encompass public policy and organisational leadership. He is a Fellow of the UK Academy of Social Sciences.

Professor Peck is Interim Chair of the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) and a former Board member of both UUK and the Universities and Colleges Employers Association (UCEA). He was a member of the UK Government's Post-18 Fees and Funding – aka Augar – Review Panel. In May 2022 he was appointed as the Department for Education's Higher Education Student Support Champion and became Chair of the Higher Education Mental Health Implementation Taskforce in June 2023. He will step down from all these roles by early July 2025 when he will commence as Chair of the Office for Students. In July 2020 he was appointed Deputy Lieutenant of Nottinghamshire and was made a Commander of the British Empire (CBE) in the 2021 New Year Honours List for Services to Higher Education.

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