



The All-Party Parliamentary University Group

All-Party Parliamentary University Group Meeting
Preparations for the next academic year
Wednesday 7 July
17:00-18:15

Speakers

- Professor Debra Humphris, Vice-Chancellor of the University of Brighton and Chair of University Alliance
- Geoff Barton, General Secretary of the Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL)
- Chris Havergal, News Editor, Times Higher Education
- Vivienne Stern, Director of Universities UK International
- *Meeting chaired by Daniel Zeichner MP*

Professor Debra Humphris gave a brief overview of the work universities have done to prepare for the start of the next academic year, including extensive scenario planning and Covid outbreak response planning. She stressed that many universities' staff members had remained working on campus throughout the pandemic, and that staff were tired from adapting to the fast-changing guidance throughout the past two academic years.

She went on to welcome the Home Office's recent announcement that they would change visas to enable international students to start studies in their own country. However, she relayed to the group that the expectation was that if all international students came at once there would not be enough quarantine capacity to accommodate those from red list countries.

Professor Humphris moved on to consider how the University of Brighton had responded to agile working, concluding that there has been a significant improvement in staff work/life balance. She noted that an improved work life balance was particularly positive because staff had been working flat out for the past 16 months, but raised concerns about some staff members' anxieties around returning to campus. Support for staff members as well as students would therefore be needed and provided.

Geoff Barton began by informing the group that he was speaking on behalf of 21,500 school and college leaders across all different types of institutions and that he had asked for feedback from the membership ahead of the meeting.

Geoff confirmed that ASCL were already seeing parents put pressure on teachers due to the assessment arrangements, suggesting the problem with using the word "teacher" in Teacher Assessed Grades made it seem as if it would be the teacher's fault if a student did not receive the grade a parent was expecting. He said ASCL were doing what they can to protect individual teachers by reiterating the quality assurance in the system.

On grade inflation, Geoff said that ASCL were preparing to counter the anticipated media narrative that would ask how young people who missed out on a third of teaching could have received higher grades than they may have got two years ago.

He said this runs the risk of destabilising teachers' work on assessments and therefore they would stress the integrity of the process in any responses.

In terms of the anxieties young people were expressing, he recounted fears about university places filling up if some schools were quicker to present evidence to exam boards than others. Exams were usually seen as a 'defining moment' and this being taken away had led to students worrying that they had not covered the correct material for their chosen university course. Finally, he stressed the importance of getting the narrative right on results day and appeals so young people can receive their qualifications with dignity and pride.

In the longer term, Geoff spoke about the importance of a dialogue between universities, schools and colleges to ensure young people from disadvantaged backgrounds do not fall through the gaps. He referred to the recent Education Policy Institute (EPI) report that showed before Covid-19 it would have taken 500 years to close the gap between the advantaged and disadvantaged in the English system.

Geoff concluded his remarks by noting the transformation impact of university on many disadvantaged students, that for many young people higher education was where you learn to take your place as a citizen in society, providing a stepping stone to independence, as well as a place of academic study.

Reflecting on the challenges universities and students had faced over the last academic year, **Chris Havergal**, said a theme that went through the Times Higher Education reporting was the significant uncertainty that universities have had to deal with in terms of government policy and the lack of financial support given to them. He felt that universities had done their best to offer a high-quality learning environment in challenging circumstances, they rose to the challenge after a chaotic admissions period and they had made significant efforts to limit the spread of Covid on campuses.

He acknowledged that many of the projected major challenges such as a collapse in international student numbers and universities shutting down had not materialised. He thought more could have been done to manage student expectations as students and parents had felt let down by the lack of face-to-face contact time, referring to the recent HEPI student experience survey.

Chris referred to the success story for universities in terms of the vaccine and research but noted this was detached from the wider policy conversation on the role of higher education.

In regards to the future of teaching, he thought the face-to-face experience would become even more important for students. He said there is an important role for the sector to make the case for blended learning if universities are going to adopt it in the long term, particularly focusing on the overall contact hours on offer and the advantages of smaller group seminars and discussions.

He concluded his remarks by suggesting that student support and mental health would be a key priority for universities over the next year. He noted that those services are already under significant pressure and the government had not yet responded to Universities UK's call for more funding for those services.

Vivienne Stern focused her remarks on the ongoing challenges for international students. She referred to the early predictions that international student numbers would plummet but reported that in fact for many universities it was a reasonably strong recruitment round. Vivienne informed the group that signs were looking positive for the current application round but there was a real dichotomy between international and EU recruitment. The January UCAS data showed year-on-year growth in international applications, but a collapse in EU demand. She confirmed that the new graduate visa has led to a growth in demand from India. Vivienne took the opportunity to thank all the parliamentarians in the meeting who fought for the new graduate route.

Vivienne reported that the demand for international study has remained resilient given the challenges that had been put on international students in this context, including the challenge of studying online in the past academic year. She said it was important to mention that the attitudes of different groups of students varied considerably in regards to studying online, giving examples of variations in attitude between Chinese and Indian students.

On current issues, she noted the managed quarantine was the top concern and that there would not be capacity in the system to deal with the influx of students in the Autumn without additional capacity or alternative arrangements. She encouraged parliamentarians to press the government for further details of plans to deal with incoming international students to ensure a smooth start to term and no damage to the UK's reputation. Finally, she stressed the excellent support that was available to international students in the UK but that this was not always clearly communicated or understood.