

Student Consultation work to support the Campus Foresight Group: Reporting Dec 2020

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Context & Approach

During Semester 1 2020/21, the Student Engagement team were asked to capture student views on a Post-Covid 19 University, from approaches to teaching to activities on campus, to wider strategic change. How do students imagine the University in the next 2-3 years, and beyond?

It is critical when looking at a future shape of the University we have to first take into account the current student experience.

At the time of the consultation (Autumn 2020), there was a level of uncertainty amongst students in regards to how the academic year would be delivered - from blended to in-person teaching to the possibility of any on-campus teaching.

Context & Approach

Due to the aforementioned uncertainty, the Student Engagement team focused the initial consultation work on students current:

- Experiences
- Communication with the University
- Attitude towards safety on campus

This then enabled the team to work with students in more depth to think about the **future** of the campus.

Following the initial survey, the main headlines were that

- Students felt unprepared and concerned ahead of the 2020/21 Academic Year.
- Students appreciated the measures that had been put in place at the University during Covid-19
- There was strong appetite from students to be on campus and to engage in dialogue about the future.

Workshop Design

Having a better picture of students current views allowed for the design of some future state workshops that focussed on the future perceptions of teaching, activity on campus, communication, and accommodation.

A 90 minute interactive synchronous workshop was devised, which concentrated on;

- **Teaching and Learning:** expanding on current experiences of Blended Learning, understanding what would students want to see in the future for Seminars, Labs, Practical's, Lectures. Unpacking what would learning look like?
- **Activity on Campus:** understanding how students would want to engage with curricular and extra curricular activities on campus, what could be the travel implications, how would they access facilities, food outlets, and how did they see any previous attachment to 'home' academic buildings changing etc.
- **Accommodation:** what were current experiences of student accommodation, future discussions on tenancies, forms of accommodation.

The conversations undertaken by the students were recorded by individuals on digital worksheets, and collaboratively by the students when in breakout rooms.

Results- 4 Key Themes

The results of the survey and discussions from the workshops highlighted 4 key themes that were important for students.

These were having Choice, clear Communication, Activity on Campus/Safety on Campus and Community.

Choice – students wanted a holistic flexible approach to student life, ability for students to ‘plan/book’ campus days, personalised timetables, flexible accommodation, emphasis on work life balance.

Communication – to be inclusive & clear, through fast, transparent channels. A ‘go to’ human contact, Clear expectations, and ultimately a desire to be with other students.

Campus & Campus safety – students wanted (short term) opportunities for testing, and accountability, and (longer term) imagined they would be more evaluative in approaching travelling to campus.

Community – acknowledgment that students appreciate flexibility and choice, but want to feel connected and a part of the University and to Manchester as a city.

The next few slides walk through these themes in more depth.

Choice

Moving forward, students felt they would appreciate a more flexible approach to student life. Students felt that the experiences of 2020 opens up a new dialogue of how we could embed further flexibility into the student experience.
Some ideas were -

A Flexible approach to Accommodation: Opportunities to introduce flexible contracts, 'Short-stay' options (more aligned to Airbnb models) for students to complete assessments closer to campus. Contracts designed per semester, later contract dates for International Students

Personalised Timetables: Being able to 'Book in' to on campus face-to-face Teaching sessions, as well as having the option to engage digitally. Students have appreciated the flexibility that asynchronous learning has had, and would like space on campus to work with other students to be able to 'stop, start & play' and then consolidate teaching content with peers – students named them Zoom-a-longs (zoom watch-a-longs)

Plan my Campus Days - having the choice to select which days to come on to campus, and bespoke build a calendar around that. 'Booking in' teaching sessions, around extra/co-curricular activities. Students saw benefits to work life balance, in being able to secure paid work and caring responsibilities better if they could plan their 'on campus' days.

Communication

Clear, fast transparent channels: Student communication at the beginning of 2020/21 left some students feeling unprepared to commence the year. Many students highlighted the perceived lack of information from their programme, and the overwhelming uncertainty as to if on-campus activity could go ahead as hoped.

Moving forward, students wanted to see a change in how the University relays information and **to consider what communication channels are most effective for a more digital experience.** Students are happy to work in partnership to define which channels would be the most appropriate for them to receive communications from. Students also shared a specific concern regarding the timing of announcements, and were therefore also keen to work with the University to look at timelines for communications moving forward.

Consistent Experience:

In the long-term how do we create a consistent experience - from reviewing communications to the events we run. There was a strong favour from students to continue the access to live Q&A's with Academics for Semester 2, creating an informal space for students to ask questions and have access to that direct communication, and to help them feel apart of the University.

Campus Safety

From the survey and workshops, students show a clear appetite to want to onto campus for small-group teaching and extra/co-curricular activities (such as societies and sports) However, currently, the risk of doing so for many students outweighs the benefit. In the workshops, we explored this theme further and the change in attitudes and availability for testing was discussed.

Change in Attitudes - Living in a household with key workers, vulnerable people, or needing to use public transport are just some of the factors students need to take into account when weighing up the risk of coming onto campus. As well as this, students have to factor in the actions of their peers especially in cases where people may choose to not follow correct guidance. In the future, we need to revisit how students perceive the idea of coming onto campus. Longer term, students felt this attitude change of being more evaluative in their travels would stay with them longer than just until the end of the pandemic.

Opportunities for Covid-19 testing: Currently students are happy to come to campus for COVID testing, for many students argued this should be a wider part of our practice moving forward, subject to the introduction of a vaccine

Community

Building the community: Students' no matter where they are, still want to experience the Manchester buzz. Especially for our first year UG students, a sense of belonging within their academic community will play a crucial part in their second semester experience. Any on campus activity will help to foster and build on this greatly.

Students acknowledged a shift in attitude, from believing that University connections can only come from face-to-face activity, to accepting that a blended approach could still keep them feel as though they are connected/a 'part' of the University. For example, students appreciated the flexibility of online lectures with the sense of community of being able to dial in to a synchronous Q&A with staff.

Work life balance: This year has shown how flexibility can be beneficial for many students' experiences, whilst we look at this we need to consider the impact this may have on developing a sense of belonging and making connections for all demographics of students at University. If students decide to study remotely as opposed to on campus, we need to create peer support groups to support this student cohort.

Authentic relationships: How do we create relationships in a natural, informal way. From creating small study groups, zoom watchalongs, to building course identity through Societies and Peer Support. Ahead of Semester 2 & the future, how do we translate this to on-campus /blended, yet inclusive, experiences.

Conclusions

Students have appreciated and **embraced a new approach to flexible and blended learning** and want to see this continue.

They appreciate that there cannot be one University of Manchester experience, but want to see a **consistent student experience** where possible, with clear, inclusive and transparent communication.

Students predict a shift in attitude when it comes to approaching campus and how much time is spent on campus. Foreseeing a more **evaluative approach of only travelling on to campus when there was a clear purpose**

Students are interested in exploring with the university how the experience can be more flexible, having **students 'book in' their on campus days**, including booking in to face-to-face teaching on days that are convenient, and equally booking into University accommodation on those days too.

But, students **do not want to lose their sense of community and connection with the University** and to its diverse city.

Final Thoughts and What's Next?

Students are keen to be involved - and to partner with the University broadly in further consultation processes. Many students were interested in being involved in this initial consultation, but also expressed how they would be interested in working with project moving forward.

Future thinking is challenging - students sometimes found it difficult to separate themselves from the current circumstances to look forward

...Therefore, taking these two points on board, we need to further consider how we partner with students moving forward, to allow them to be involved in the decisions directly affecting them and future students.

Following slide – Appendix 1 Consultation Respondents Breakdown

Appendix 1: Respondents Breakdown

Overall we had 108 respondents across the survey and workshops, with a high majority of respondents in Year 2,3 and 4

Survey	HUMS	BMH	FSE	Total
Year 1	4	1	5	10
Year 2	12	5	12	29
Year 3+	8	4	13	25
PG	2	4	2	8
Total	26	14	32	72

Workshops	HUMS	BMH	FSE	Total
Year 1	3	2	2	7
Year 2	4	4	6	14
Year 3+	2	4	5	11
PG	1	2	1	4
Total	10	12	14	36