

Transitions, retention and progression: episode three

Podcast transcript

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Key

- + **BB:** Ben Brabon (host)
- + **HGA:** Hillary Gyebi-Ababio

Transcript

BB: Hello and welcome to Advanced HE's podcast series on transitions retention and progression the podcasts include a range of students staff and other stakeholder voices offering up different perspectives on what we've learned over the last year and what we need to continue to develop going forward through the 2021-22 academic year

We're delighted to welcome Hillary Gyebi-Ababio, Vice President for Higher Education at the UK's National Union of Students. Many of you will be familiar with Hillary's work, she was previously the Undergraduate Education Officer and Chair of the Widening Participation Network at the University of Bristol. As well as being a champion of students, Hillary has worked on numerous projects focused on supporting the most marginalized students in education. Her mission is to make sure that students are the architects of their own education, welcome Hillary and thank you for joining us.

HGA: Thank you so much for having me on the podcast, it's always great to join with Advance HE and I think this is an important place to have discussions like this especially as the academic year is barrelling ahead towards us.

BB: Thank you Hillary. It's been a challenging last year and perhaps we can begin with some reflection. What have you discovered about student transitions, progression and retention over the last year?

HGA: I think there's a lot that has been learned and there is still to learn from the past year, almost the past two years at this point. First of all, it's been really interesting that the pandemic has been able to rock the sector so much that we've had to make some pretty fundamental changes in what it looks like to support students at every stage of learning. I think there's been focus on different areas at different times whether it be most recently with student transitions, so sixth formers going into higher education or other types of further education, or even thinking about students that are currently in higher education going into consecutive years of their journey. I think it's been really interesting in seeing how, first of all, what students are wanting and expecting has been changed. I think lots of students have

this view of how they expected university to be, the things that they were excited for, and I think we've really had to rethink the student experience in that respect. I also think that there's been really big changes of how education is delivered, which in some ways have been fantastic in terms of how it served student populations in a really diverse way. For disabled students it's better access for them and they're able to engage with learning easier and students like parents, carers, mature students for example, the flexibility that it's given them to have online provision in some way shape or form has been tremendously helpful for them. And so I think that's been a really great place that we've seen a good reflection of what has changed and what might be going forward.

What I will say though is that we have seen also a lot of negatives over the past year. I mean when the pandemic hit we had the resurgence of the black lives matter movement. After the events of what happened in America and following that we've just seen so much injustice in the world that there is no real separation that people can justify anymore, of separating how people are impacted by wider world events including the pandemic and their education. And so I think we've really seen a space where social responsibility has become a really big deal in our education sector but going further than that I think we've seen how the treatment of people in a crisis has been really closely scrutinised and I think a lot of students and staff members that have previously felt that they haven't had the place to be heard about their experiences and the issues that they go through. As a black woman, I've seen very much of that from a race perspective and a gender perspective but we've seen all of those issues really be exposed and in a really particular way, and so I think there's almost been a push for universities, government and sector bodies to really do better and do more in how they look after their community and actually how they show their social responsibility on a wider level. So that's my initial reflections I would say but there's lots to be learned and lots to be thought about going forward.

BB: Thank you Hillary. If you had to give some advice to the sector about how best to support students as they transition into and progress through higher education and also out of higher education, what would you encourage universities to consider and perhaps to do more of or perhaps to change completely?

HGA: So actually one of the most exciting parts of my role and one of the most interesting parts that I really enjoy is that I get to really think outside of the structures and the traditions of the sector and I get to really challenge the norms and the traditions of what we do. One of the things that I've really perceived out of this past, you know, these past 18 months or two years is that if there was ever a time to think differently and do differently and actually take risks, to do something that we've never tried before, now is the time. I think the pandemic has been a really terrible way for the sector and for the world to be shaken up but people have gone through so much over the past few years but I think what it has done is that it's

shaken us as a society and as an education sector enough to actually rethink what we were doing and actually blank slate things quite a bit and do stuff in a completely new way.

And so what I would say firstly is that it's so important that we don't just go back to the comfort of the familiar of what we used to do. I mean when we were in a world where online access to lectures was not a common thing, disabled students, parents, mature students, carers suffered greatly and not being able to have the flexibility that came with online teaching and learning. And even when we think about how students and how staff are supported, I think more and more where we're having to recognise that people exist outside of the bubble of institutions. So the things that go on in their lives whether it's to do with their race, whether it's through their gender, sexuality, identity in whatever shape or form it impacts how they exist in the spaces that they are in, whether it's in education or in work or somewhere in between. And so I think there's something really important about how are we making sure that we're not just tacking on solutions to some fundamental issues that have been going on for years and years. How do we actually move forward by building or rather rebuilding an education system that actually serves to support and look after and enable and encourage those people that have not always suffered in silence for so long, and really make our education sector an environment where everyone can exist and thrive.

That's been at the heart of what I've been thinking about. So when we talk about what would I say to institutions or the sector as things to for them to take going forward, I think it's really important that they don't run away from risks, don't run away from doing things in a different way or doing things in ways that feels almost antithetical to the way your structures are built. I think right now is the time for change and if you don't use this time to change you are seriously going to fall behind and let down the people that trust in you most.

I think also, you know, we've been speaking for years and years about what it looks like for students to engage and to input and actually to partner with institutions and the sector in building what we do, how we deliver it, how we show the student experience and show the learning experience to be something that is constantly evolving and growing and changing and becoming better. And I think right now we're seeing that what it looks like to partner with students isn't just what we were used to with surveys and consultations and lots of faceless activity. I think what we're seeing now more and more is get students involved, even if that's sometimes your most technical levels. You know students wanted transparency throughout the whole of this pandemic, they've been wanting to know, whether it's on fees, how their fees are calculated or how decisions are being made or even how there may be alternatives to their teaching and learning and assessment. Even that can enable them to engage with their learning well, and so embrace that student feedback whether it's negative or positive. Embrace students wanting to be involved and wanting to know what you are doing and how you are doing it, and embrace the vulnerability that comes with being transparent with what you're doing. I think some of the things that I've respected over the pandemic most of all from institutions is where they've been transparent about sometimes not knowing what to do and not knowing how to go forward with what they're doing but actually inviting students into that vulnerable place with them and going on a journey to find some solutions. So I would

say take risks, partner with students authentically, be vulnerable, and actually don't go back to the comfortable traditional ways of the past.

BB: Thank you Hillary, there's some wonderful challenges there for the sector. You said don't go back to the comfort of the familiar, don't run away from risks, embrace vulnerability, I think those are wonderful messages for the sector to really reflect upon and consider going forward so we can really make some genuine change.

As VP Higher Education of the NUS, where will you be focusing your energies in the new academic year?

HGA: So this is actually a perfect time to be asking me because we've been doing all of the planning and the thinking about this over the past few months and you know a lot of what we wanted to do when we first came into post, myself and the team really wanted to think about ways of transforming the education sector. Ways of really rethinking and rebuilding an education system that really served and worked for students and actually authentically served the purpose of education as opposed to the means by which sometimes people talk about education.

And so on a UK level we've had two big priorities that we've been looking at and actually over the next year I think we're in a really good place to go forward with that in a proactive way and rather than the adjustment to the reactive sort of way that we've had to manage the pandemic over the past year. So one of those is really thinking about a new vision for education and I think there's something really important for us to be thinking about in terms of what people are calling the post-covid world. You know how are we going to think about education going forward? How are we going to think about what it means for the people that engage with education? What does it mean for how education is talked about? Who gets involved in education? Who is a part of that space? And so that's going to be a lot of talking to people and supporting students on the ground with really tackling the roots of the issues that they are talking about on campus and talking about on a day-to-day basis.

We're also thinking about stuff that goes deeper into that sort of social responsibility that I was talking about earlier that universities and actually wider society have now and become more alive to in many ways. I think our second priority campaign 'decolonizing education' is really important in that respect. That when we speak about decolonizing we speak about grasping at the root of systemic racism, systemic injustice even and actually how do we stop that patchwork fixing of thinking about systemic injustice as something that we can sort of mentor students out of or survey people out of until we find ways of patchwork solutioning. And actually how do we uproot that systemic injustice and how do we, by default, make our education system, make our society anti-racist in nature, anti-discriminatory in nature and make it a space where everyone can exist and freely be able to thrive. Personally that's at the heart of why I do this work and that's at the heart of what NUS are really prioritising and

so hopefully we can be barrelling full speed ahead with getting students at the heart of shaping their education and being architects - as i've spoken about many a time - being architect of their education in the most authentic way without having to worry about being constricted by structures and ways of doing things that have previously stopped them from engaging in the ways that matter to them. And actually over the pandemic in the ways that they're interested in, that they've shown us over the past few years.

BB: Thank you Hillary, that really is a big challenge to the sector to use this moment in a post-covid world to try and catalyse change across the system to not just use a sticking plaster approach but actually to really tackle some of the underpinning issues that are systemic across the system. I think that will get us all thinking. I want to close on that and thank you again for your time and for your provocation and for your thoughtfulness around how we best support students as they transition into and through higher education.

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