

Transitions, retention and progression: episode two

Podcast transcript

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Key

+ **BB:** Ben Brabon (host)

+ **HC:** Hannah Copeland

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

I'm delighted to introduce Hannah Copeland, Vice President for Education at Heriot-Watt University. Hannah, welcome and thank you for joining us. For those of you who are not familiar with Heriot-Watt University, it is a Scottish university established in 1821 with approximately 30,000 students across five campuses in Edinburgh the Scottish borders Orkney, Dubai and Malaysia. One interesting fact about Heriot-Watt is it has the oldest graduate club in the UK - The Watt Club - with over 130,000 alumni worldwide in over 190 countries. Welcome Hannah, two months ago you became VP Education at Heriot-Watt could you tell us a little bit about your priorities for the 2021-22 academic year and where you're going to focus your energies?

HC: Yes so I ran the manifesto to get elected, so i'll go through my manifesto points that the students voted me in for. So I want to make education here a lot more accessible and inclusive so implementing an opt-out lecture recording policy completely accessible for all students and working with decolonising the curriculum. We're a very steady university at Heriot-Watt so it will be a challenge but i'm looking forward to taking that on and working with existing societies. Increasing support for students, so getting a more accommodating mitigating circumstances system, right now there's a lot of red tape and i don't think our students can work to their full potential without that support in place. And working on counselling waiting times right now the meeting times can be extremely long and like I said before, to help the students to work with their best abilities. And then improving the feedback system so creating a university-wide feedback form so students know exactly what feedback they're going to get and how they can improve next time. And closing the feedback loop by working on their awareness of student representation, so making sure everyone knows who their class reps and student officers are at Heriot-Watt.

BB: Thank you Hannah, I really think that's very interesting the things you've picked up on there that actually do support student progression, student success things like - as you said - the student feedback form, helping students to better understand actually their own experience of learning, teaching, assessment so again thank you for sharing that.

Within that context, are there particular challenges you would like to address particularly when we're thinking about those journeys that students are on as they come into university and progress through their higher education experience?

HC: I mean the challenge I think of, thinking of my little brother who's going to college this year, is that he's never sat a higher or advanced higher exam and he's done a few national fives when he was 15 and I was thinking how can students be expected to sit an exam at university level when they haven't done it at higher or advanced higher? I think that's going to be a huge challenge not just at Heriot-Watt but across the sector. How we can equip and prepare students to sit these exams.

BB: That's such a brilliant point. I think the fact that you're raising that around the types of assessment that students will experience in a university setting that they may not have actually experienced in school because of the current conditions we find ourselves in. You know thinking about covid over the last 18 months but also feeding through into the new academic year, these are going to be the challenges that students will face and staff will have to continue to respond to. Again thank you for sharing that, I think it's a really good point in terms of what we need to address as a sector as a whole. If we think a little bit more about that academic year and we think about some of the concerns that students might have as they come to university - perhaps as freshers, as new students but also as returning students - are there any concerns that are really resonating and are you hearing concerns from students as they come into the new academic year?

HC: Recently on our Instagram we ran a little poll so our officers could gauge how students were feeling returning to campus. One of the concerns was students coming to Edinburgh or Heriot-Watt itself and not getting any in person face-to-face teaching and potentially being isolated and halls or in a flat and having to study online when they can do it from home. And there's the financial cost of that - of paying rent and there's a lot of stuff behind it, and I think that's definitely a concern from students 100 percent. Especially because I or the university can't predict what is going to happen with the current Covid situation and we don't know what's going to happen in couple months' time never mind tomorrow, so it's hard to predict that. Also the safety concerns. You know students in Scotland could be 16/17 going to university and wouldn't have their vaccine yet and we are asking thousands of students to come onto campus and can we ensure that they are going to be safe? And this is definitely a concern that students raised. So yes I think that also with RBL it's also moving from the kind

of online to in person, are people going to feel safe to be in person? Are they going to want to input online, how is that going to affect the learning experience? That's definitely how people are feeling right now.

BB: Thank you Hannah, I really think that actually these resonate not just in the context of Heriot-Watt but actually across the sector. These are really significant fears and concerns that students have and as you say it's that uncertainty in terms of what the future holds. So in a way that's a challenge again for the sector as a whole to actually say we need to think more about what that on-campus experience will look like in relationship to these sort of hybrid forms of learning that we've experienced over the last you know year to 18 months or so. You were mentioning again of the context of Covid again particularly younger students coming to campus that may not have been vaccinated as well. Is there anything in that context that students would like to see universities doing more of to support those sort of transitions to university at these uncertain times?

HC: I think there should be more transparency from universities as to what students can actually expect and I think that over the past year we've seen a lot of promises from a lot of people - government, universities - of what the students can expect and I don't think that's very helpful for anyone. And I think that more transparency for students and obviously more realistic expectations in managing how university is going to actually be this year would be really helpful, and even maybe having some sort of older students speaking to younger students about what they can expect during these sort of times and how we come out of the pandemic.

BB: Thank you Hannah, I think it's a really good point that you're raising around transparency. Again that is, in a way another challenge to the sector: to be more transparent about what the student experience will really be like. And I love the idea that you're suggesting there about that cross-level/cross-year mentoring, again thinking about the different experiences that students have already had you know from year to year. And that actually goes backward as well in terms of thinking about that transition from school into university, so again thank you for sharing that. Within that context, are you hearing specific things from students around what form that transparency should take? Are there, for example, particular ways of communicating with students that you would advise universities to use and what form that communication might take? Again should it be via you within the context of the student union or do you see more of a programme, more module focused approach to student communication?

HC: So i've only been here two months I haven't had any students to speak to yet unfortunately but what I could assume is that I think university-wide communication is our best because I think sometimes there is a loss in translation when you go down to a course level. And we've seen that even last year when I was a rep, people hearing different things across the university and everyone's hearing whispers of what was actually going on. And I think, coming from a student union perspective would be good because I think that the students look at us and see that we've been in the situation. We have been students and understand what it's like being a student at Heriot-Watt and being a student at university, and I think that if it came from us then 'they understand what we're going through so we're going to have a bit more respect for them' than if they're coming from high-level university staff who haven't been uni for years.

BB: Thank you Hannah, again that is really great food for thought for the sector to think about how we communicate effectively and how we work in partnership with student union to actually really make that message clear to our students in terms of what that experience is going to be like over the coming 12 months. Thank you so much again Hannah for your insights, you've really given us so much to think about and you've raised challenges for the sector to address; some of the real concerns that students have as they prepare to come back to university for the new academic year. Thank you again



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