



Making the Most of the New Normal:

Delivering an Outstanding Digital Student Experience

Preface

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The student experience is probably one of the greatest challenges for our education community.

Today, getting this experience right implies providing an unprecedented level of personalisation in our services and meeting a generation that expects instant comprehensive support in every area of their life. It's also about creating a strong sense of belonging within our community. Today's students want to fit in, to belong, and to be part of a movement. We all crave approval, and when we arrive in a new environment, the need for connection, interaction, and validation intensifies.

What drives individuals to an institution or a company is the culture its community shares. Its values and mission hold this group together, and in challenging situations, they strengthen the group's confidence to keep moving forward.

The current challenges we face invite us to transform ourselves. While we are encouraged to distance ourselves physically from one another, we are demonstrating creativity to stay close virtually. Digital platforms have never been so central in our lives.

In higher education, these challenges have accelerated our digital transformation. Our first challenge was to support our students and our employees wellbeing. Next, we had to operationalise our remote learning strategy. And now, we look further into the opportunities technology offers us to transform the entire student experience.

In times of uncertainty, we have to nurture the trust we have built with our community. We need to continue delivering outstanding student experiences. Ones that will help students become the critical thinkers of tomorrow's world and a driving force for social good.

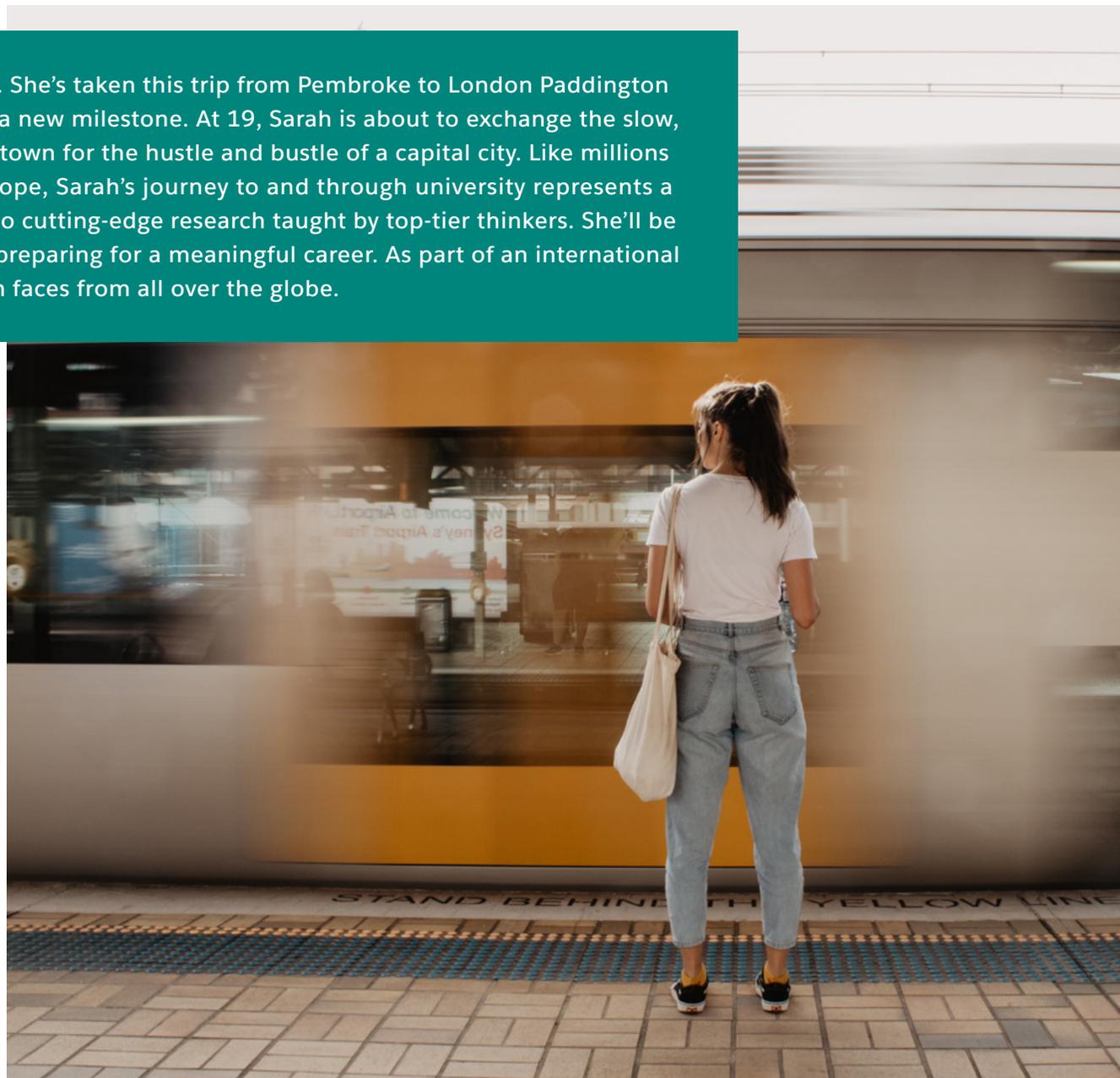
Sarah waits nervously for her train. She's taken this trip from Pembroke to London Paddington many times over. But today marks a new milestone. At 19, Sarah is about to exchange the slow, familiar pace of her native coastal town for the hustle and bustle of a capital city. Like millions of students across the UK and Europe, Sarah's journey to and through university represents a rite of passage. She'll be exposed to cutting-edge research taught by top-tier thinkers. She'll be earning a valuable credential and preparing for a meaningful career. As part of an international cohort, she'll discover friendship in faces from all over the globe.

Entering Higher Education

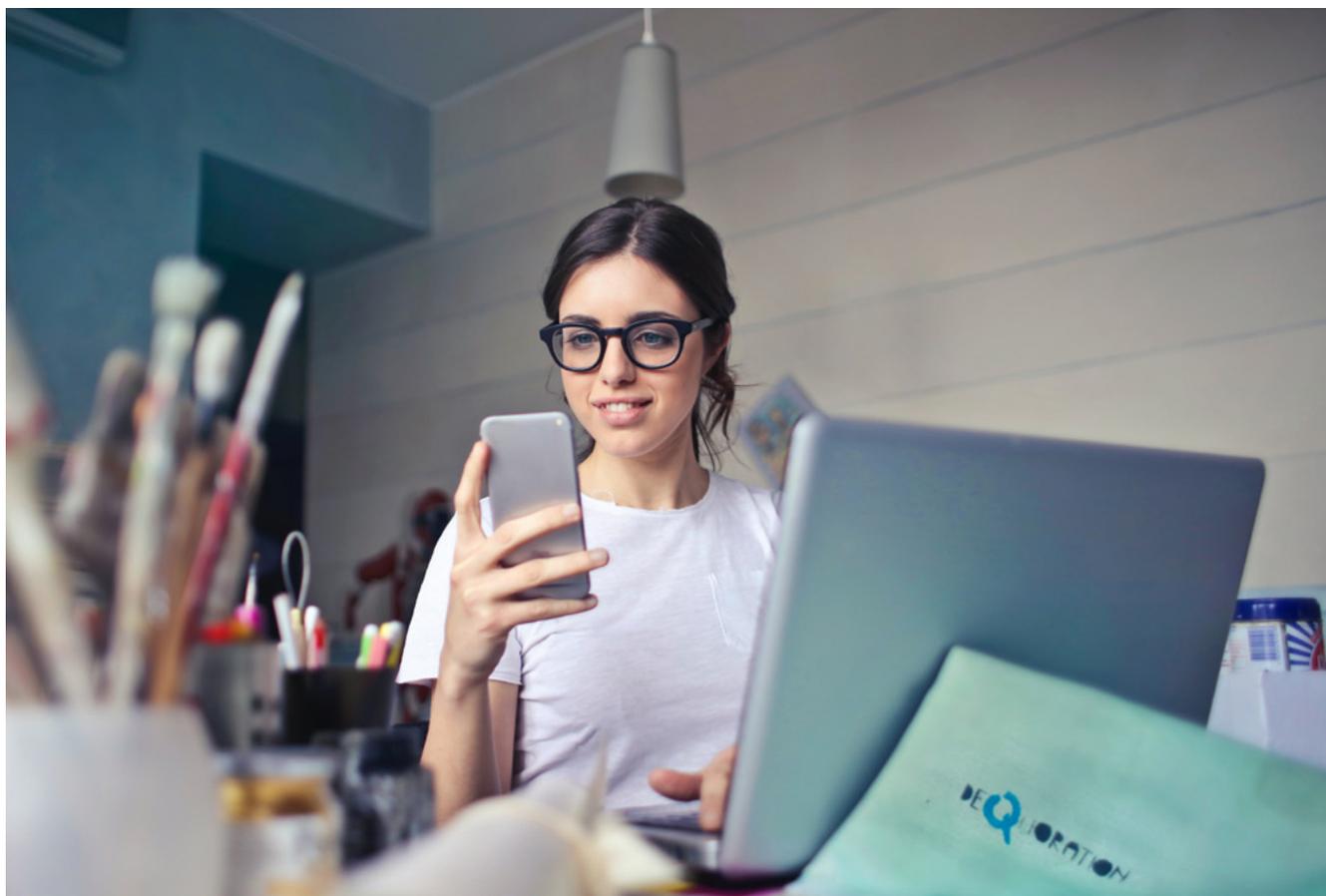
Among those first-year students, a growing portion will be the first in their families to pursue higher education.¹ Others will experience a campus that has markedly changed from that of their parents. While the number of young people attending higher education has been growing, there's no doubt that COVID-19 has put student enrolment to the test.

Universities are engaging in sustained efforts to widen the participation of all students. They are especially concerned about students who are underrepresented or come from non-traditional backgrounds. Across the UK and Europe, many students are taking on part-time jobs and accruing debt to manage the high costs of living. With more at stake, students are choosing to invest in institutions that they know will invest back in them.

¹ Yorke, H. (2017, October 18). Half of students starting university are now first in their family to do so, new figures reveal. *The Telegraph*.



...today's students are looking for an outstanding experience of learning, unwavering personalised support, and strong community engagement.



They're not only expecting universities to provide them with the social and cultural capital they need to sustain their paths in life. When choosing an institution, today's students are looking for an outstanding experience of learning, unwavering personalised support, and strong community engagement.

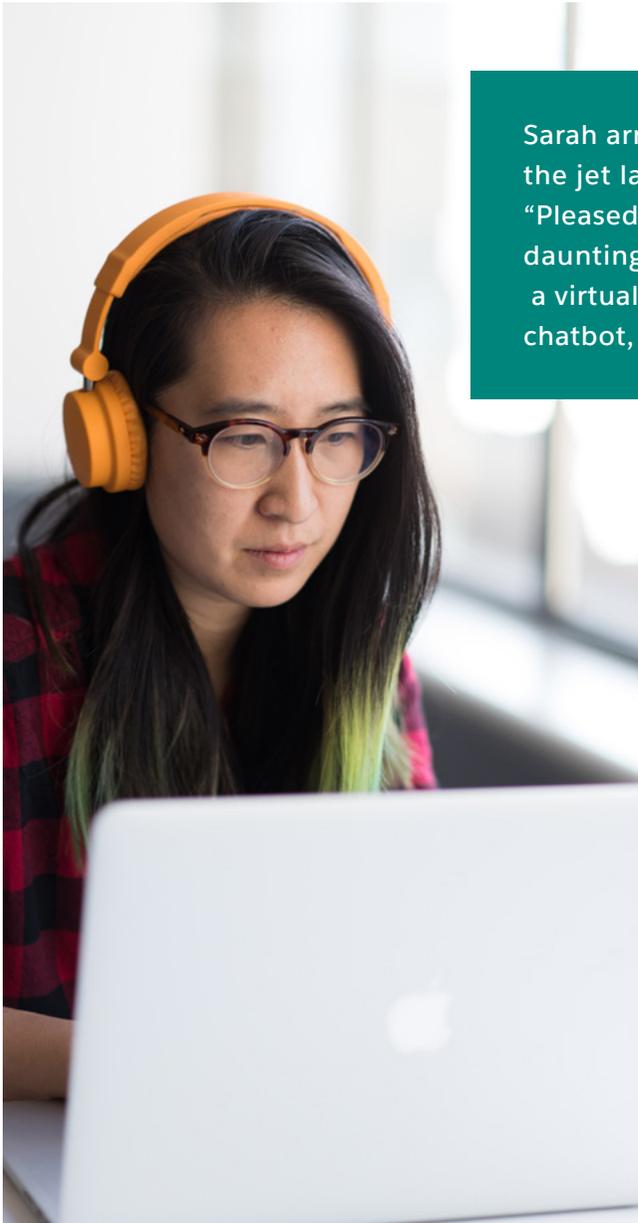
In *Higher Education's Road to Relevance*, Senior Vice-Chancellors of Educational Innovation Susan A. Ambrose and Laura A. Wankel recognise that in volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous times, students need more support than ever.²

But what kinds of support do these students need? As digital natives, they are used to receiving information quickly and perform better when they have access to a network.³ They've grown accustomed to seamless, streamlined, and integrated digital experiences. They carry smartphones instead of notebooks, tablets instead of textbooks. Chatting on Whatsapp and scrolling through Instagram feels more natural to them than writing on notepaper and reading long emails.

As universities continue to adopt student-centric approaches, the core of their concerns lies in how to best serve those students. In what ways are institutions making an effort to stay relevant—not only to the demands of the contemporary world—but to the needs of a new generation? What experiences are those institutions offering that outweigh the alternatives? When so much appears uncertain, how are universities contributing to a greater sense of belonging and wellbeing critical to student success?

² Ambrose, S. A., & Wankel, L. A. (2020). *Higher education's road to relevance: navigating complexity*. Hoboken, NJ: Jossey-Bass.

³ Prensky, M. (2001). Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants. *On the Horizon*, 9 (5).



Sarah arrives at her residence in Fitzrovia and greets her new roommate, Ichika. Still overcoming the jet lag from her 12-hour flight from Osaka, Ichika introduces herself slowly and carefully. “Pleased to meet you,” she says, acutely aware of her formality. Arriving in a new culture can be daunting, but Ichika has already familiarised herself with her university campus. She’s taken a virtual tour and has met online with an advisor. Making the most of an AI-powered university chatbot, Ichika knows that if she finds herself in doubt, it’s there to answer her questions 24/7.

The Diverse Student Body of Today’s Campuses

Japanese students like Ichika have been studying in the UK for over a century. Before the pandemic, international enrolment in UK and European universities had been steadily increasing for decades. Universities have always been large complex communities, dynamic and global in nature. The word “university” comes from the Latin word *universitas*, meaning “the whole.” Institutional leaders have been implementing new policies and practices, so they represent all parts of “the whole.” New campuses are connecting those interacting, interrelated, and interdependent parts of “the whole.” They are nurturing a sense of belonging.

Student services offices know that some students tend to feel “apart” rather than “a part of” the whole. Writing academic assignments with a learning disability or in a new language often leads to a sense of alienation or frustration, if not failure. The stress of complicated visa applications and the absence of a well-developed local support network may result in chronic anxiety. With COVID-19 still at the forefront of their minds, many international students have reconsidered their plans to study abroad. Some have opted to defer or delay enrollment. Others have returned to their home countries. Whatever situation international students find themselves in, the clarity and quality of communication between university leaders and international students is paramount to the integrity of their experience.

As Xin-Ci Lum, from Singapore, points out in The University of Oxford's student newspaper, international students not only bridge two cultures, they bridge the policies, laws and guidelines of two governments. That in-between place can cause international students to feel especially adrift. Amidst the onset of global challenges related to COVID-19, Xin-Ci "felt torn multiple ways by contradictory advice, policies and priorities."⁴ Other international students have had positive experiences amidst the changes. One writes fondly of the ease in which his university transitioned its operations into the digital world. That student is meeting new people, adapting to a new experience, and organising a "series of chats, concerts, lectures [and] career workshops" to make the most of the situation.

University-wide measures to integrate international and non-traditional students, and just as importantly—to remain sensitive to their diverse situations—will serve the entire university community. To accommodate students of differing needs and backgrounds, universities are steering away from a one-size-fits-all approach. Bournemouth's Head of Student Services Mandi Barron comments: "We try not to focus on a homogeneous group and more on individual needs."

Across Europe, institutions are using digital technology to creatively serve every individual and prevent feelings of isolation. With the ability to intelligently analyse data, universities are better understanding the behaviours, experiences, and preferences of their students. By learning how different segments of the student population behave, they're finding ways to successfully accommodate diverse needs.

By evaluating student engagement, they're more effectively measuring the impact of their efforts and continually iterating their methods to refine their approach to student support. Universities can now describe patterns and trends, anticipate outcomes, and proactively trigger specific actions that benefit the whole community.

Equipped with the tools and knowledge to provide personalised support, universities have been successfully connecting students to appropriate services, relevant advisors, and supportive peers. That all helps foster a sense of belonging, which is critical to student success.

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⁴ Kirschbaum, M. & Lum, X. (2020, April 12). The contradictions of COVID-19: Two international students' perspective. *The Oxford Student*.

Safeguarding Students' Mental Health and Wellbeing

"One of the most worrying phenomena that many of us have witnessed in recent years," says William Davies, a lecturer at Goldsmiths, "is the rise of chronic anxiety that afflicts some students so deeply that they feel unable to come to campus."⁵ A 2017 BBC documentary accounts that one-third of students report feeling depressed or lonely while half of students with a mental health condition do not disclose it to their universities.⁶ Students are under considerable financial, academic and social stress—and young people's developing minds are more susceptible to illness. In the light of increased worries over global health and security, the mental health of students continues to be a core concern.

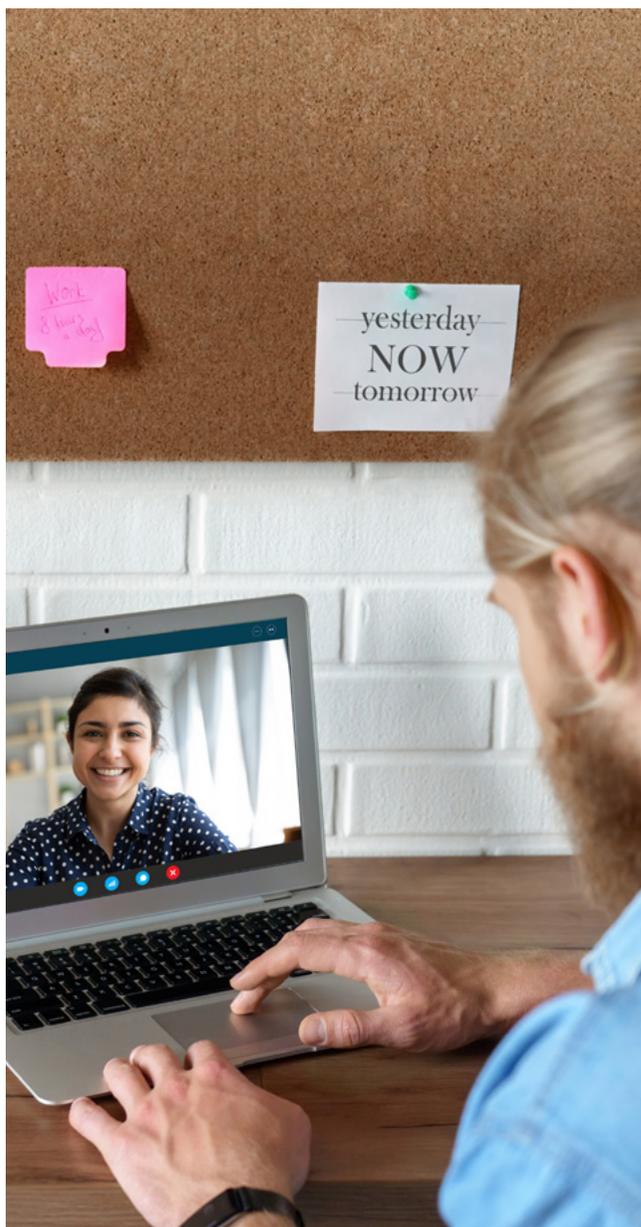
...“student mental health services need to be more proactive, expeditious, and preventative in nature.”⁷

⁵ Shackle, S. (2019, September 27). 'The way universities are run is making us ill': inside the student mental health crisis. *The Guardian*.

⁶ BBC. (2017). *Death on Campus: Our stories*. Retrieved from <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p05lyqp9>

“Civil Law” is a challenging module for Sarah, with assessments due every week. But Sarah's more worried about her friend Martin than she is about her test scores. Two weeks have passed since she's seen him either in a lecture or in the online study group. In the months following a car accident last year, Martin was diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), a condition whose symptoms have only heightened since he arrived on campus. Juggling with a part-time job and a heavy course load, his rise in stress has led to nightmares and insomnia. Sarah has been encouraging him to see a university counsellor, but his feelings of shame along with his tendency to self-isolate have prevented him from taking that advice on. Now that the university has introduced virtual support, he's open to reaching out anonymously.





Professor of Psychiatry Anne Duffy writes in *The Conversation*: “student mental health services need to be more proactive, expeditious, and preventative in nature.”⁷ In 2017, Universities UK published a report that guides education leaders “to adopt mental health as a strategic imperative.” It highlights the university’s duty of care to safeguard students and encourage staff to make mental health a part of everyday conversations. The paper recommends institutions take a “whole university approach” by prioritising mental wellbeing in a way that it permeates every aspect of university life. Finally, it asks universities to “reconfigure themselves as health-promoting and supportive environments in support of the core missions of learning, research and social and economic value creation.”⁸

But to what extent are UK and European institutions taking on the recommendation? The Royal College of Psychiatrists (RC PSYCH) reports that most institutions are now providing guidance and training for staff to help them spot the signs of mental distress, so they can make appropriate referrals. They’re using digital tools to proactively identify at-risk students, so staff can intervene early. Various methods of assessment are more widely available. Virtual forums and online counselling are mitigating the fear and shame that some students feel when seeking help for a mental health condition. Buddy systems are helping ensure that new students have a familiar face to turn to in distress.⁹ Those systems of support are even more vital to student wellbeing in a time of global uncertainty.

Further, the World Mental Health International College Students (WMH-ICS) initiative has instigated greater review and synthesis of data on the efficacy of Internet-based interventions on university students’ mental health. Participating countries and collaborators include Belgium, Germany, France, Northern Ireland, Spain and Sweden.¹⁰ With 61% of Dutch students feeling pressures to perform as they face an increasingly uncertain future, the University of Leiden has set up a taskforce of students, counsellors, and experts on stress to analyse the extent of the problem within the student community. In January 2020, the Danish government set aside three million Euros to strengthen student wellbeing through pilot projects.¹¹ Overall, digital technology has given universities new opportunities to personalise communications and provide students with greater access to support. Websites, mobile applications, and AI-augmented chatbots offer a range of pathways to respond to students with different mental health issues. Universities are keen to offer such services alongside human interaction and intervention.

Moreover, sharing a unified view of students and operating on a single platform can accelerate the response time to students in need. Ultimately, that encourages trust and engagement across the institutions. Now more than ever, connecting the dots for the students as well as connecting teams across the university has never been so critical to safeguarding students’ mental health and wellbeing.

⁷ Duffy, A. (2019, September 25). University student mental health is at the tipping point. *The Conversation*.

⁸ Universities UK. (2017). Whole university approach. <https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/policy-and-analysis/stepchange/Pages/whole-university-approach.aspx>

⁹ Royal College of Psychiatrists. (2011). *Mental health of students in higher education.: College report CR166*.

¹⁰ Harvard. (2020). The WHO world mental health international college student initiative. https://www.hcp.med.harvard.edu/wmh/college_student_survey.php

¹¹ European Commission. (2020, February 11). National reforms in higher education.

https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-policies/eurydice/content/national-reforms-higher-education-18_en



When Kyann began his PhD in molecular biology, he dreamt of becoming a professor. While he still cherishes that dream, a recent diagnosis with multiple sclerosis has challenged Kyann's sense of belonging within the academy. He has not only found himself dealing with fatigue and blurry vision, he has been battling fears of where his illness might take him. Two days ago, Kyann met with a student buddy with a disability who assured him of all the ways the university will support him. Beyond standard accommodations and adjustments, all staff and faculty have been trained to empathise with the needs of disabled students. Further, Kyann's university has been maintaining an online portal for students to access class schedules and support services. Inclusive to students living with a disability, the portal directs his inquiries to the right team.

Nurturing Student Belonging

Like Kyann, students of all backgrounds may, at some point in their study, wonder if they belong and question their ability to succeed. A growing body of research has found a connection between students' sense of belonging and their persistence to complete a degree. Belonging also influences enrolment. Seventy-five percent of students say that it contributed to their decision to attend a particular university.¹² One study discovered that when students interacted frequently with peers from diverse backgrounds, they reported higher rates of satisfaction and a greater sense of belonging. Another found that "peer mentoring and staff care had a direct, positive relationship with belonging." When students sense they matter, they are more likely to feel that they belong.¹³

On the level of policy, Europe has increased its commitment to diversity and inclusiveness in higher education, as evidenced in the 2015 Yerevan Communiqué and the 2018 Paris Communiqué of the Bologna Process. The European University Association's 2019 report—*Diversity, Equity and Inclusion in European Higher Education Institutions*—points out that "inclusiveness has become a strategic question" on the institutional level. Sixty percent of universities surveyed have invited students to participate in the development of programmes to increase inclusivity.¹⁴

¹² Salesforce. *Connected Student Report*.

¹³ Supiano, B. (2018, April 14). How colleges can cultivate a sense of students' sense of belonging. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. <https://www.chronicle.com/article/How-Colleges-Can-Cultivate/243123>

¹⁴ Cleaey-Kulik, A., Jørgensen, T. E. & Stöber, Henriette. (2019, November). *Diversity, equity and inclusion in european higher education institutions*. European University Association.

A global health emergency will inevitably challenge any university's efforts to widen participation and provide access to support. When students are disabled, it can be particularly difficult for them to travel to campus and fulfill their needs, even in the best of times. However, many institutions have already equipped students virtually, including those with additional needs. Institutions have been providing online mental health resources, digital peer networks, and successful distant learning modules.

To further increase belonging, universities are offering guidance, counselling and mentoring. They've been designing accessible buildings and inclusive campus activities. Flexible study options, preparatory courses and childcare on campus accommodate the needs of a diverse student body. Staff and faculty are training in intercultural communication, personal coaching, and strategies for raising awareness. Personalised communication and support are assisting institutions in their efforts to build a sense of community both online and offline. But most importantly, universities are soliciting students themselves to share feedback and act as a driving force to cultivate a sense of belonging for all.

...“inclusiveness has become a strategic question” on the institutional level.



Revealing Students' Full Potential

It can be a long road from application to graduation. Sarah, Ichika, Martin, and Kyann will all face highs and lows, setbacks and triumphs. Diverse factors will shape their experiences, some which lie in the hands of the university. A comprehensive online platform that continuously connects students and staff can mitigate the challenges of any situation. Well-equipped and well-prepared universities more readily reduce hardships, maintain a sense of community, and ensure students have the best chance for success.

If the recent events have highlighted anything, it has been that tightening bonds with students on and off campus leads to a richer, more meaningful student experience. Students need to feel secure enough to trust themselves, their networks, and their potential. As the globe adjusts to a new normal, student services will be instrumental to both institutional and student success. By making the most of digital possibilities, student support is enabling every learner to thrive in all dimensions of their lives. Unlocking technology will be critical, if not the key, to ensuring that institutions develop the agility they need to continue delivering outstanding student experiences in the world ahead.

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² Ambrose, S. A., & Wankel, L. A. (2020). *Higher education's road to relevance: navigating complexity*. Hoboken, NJ: Jossey-Bass.



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