

The University Happy Index: Can staff in higher education still flourish in the University of 2030?

Summary

The panel explored what universities must do to create environments where staff can flourish while maintaining high performance. Discussion centred on leadership, organisational culture, staff wellbeing, accountability and the importance of trust. While institutions have a responsibility to create supportive cultures, panellists also argued that individuals must actively contribute to those environments.

Introduction

The debate examined whether higher education institutions can remain positive, high-performing workplaces amid increasing pressures on the sector. Panellists discussed leadership, staff wellbeing, student voice, organisational culture and how universities can balance performance with care

The Panel

1. **Lord James Timpson** - Minister of State, former CEO of Timpson Group, and author of *The Happy Index: Lessons in Upside-Down Management*
2. **Professor Stacy Johnson MBE** - Professor of Critical Inclusive Leadership, University of Nottingham
3. **Dr Andy Cope** - Wellbeing expert and best-selling author
4. **Dr Debbie McVitty** - Editor of *Wonkhe*

Chaired by **Professor Kevin Shakesheff** - Vice-Chancellor, Keele University.

Key Themes

a) Leadership, trust and organisational culture

- Strong leadership should prioritise both high performance and staff happiness, creating cultures built on trust, recognition and opportunity.
- Universities should intentionally invest in leadership and management so staff feel valued, heard and supported.
- High standards and clear expectations help shape positive organisational culture, while recognising that every member of staff contributes to institutional success.
- Thriving workplaces require organisations to care for staff, but individuals must also take responsibility for how they contribute to that culture.

b) Learning, innovation and continuous improvement

- Universities should encourage learning through experimentation, rewarding initiative and viewing failure as part of improvement rather than something to avoid.
- Student voice should be treated as a valuable source of insight, with opportunities for meaningful partnership through mentoring and shared leadership.
- Staff should be able to raise difficult questions and challenge decisions without fear of damaging their careers.
- Continuous improvement depends on agency, openness, collaboration and a willingness to "do it better than you have to."

Questions from the Audience

- How should universities balance student voice with managing staff expectations?
- How can universities create cultures where difficult questions can be raised without fear of career consequences?
- How can leaders convince staff that higher education can improve despite current challenges?
- What role should organisational culture play in improving staff wellbeing?
- How should universities balance accountability, regulation and institutional autonomy?

Arguments For and Against

Arguments for stronger organisational support

- Universities should intentionally invest in leadership, management and staff wellbeing rather than expecting resilience alone.
- Staff deserve to feel trusted, recognised and included in decision-making.
- Student voice should be embedded within institutional improvement through partnership and reverse mentoring.
- Organisational culture has a significant influence on staff motivation, innovation and long-term performance.

Arguments for individual responsibility

- Individuals must actively contribute to positive workplace cultures, even within supportive organisations.
- High performance comes from maintaining high standards alongside trust and wellbeing.
- Failure should be embraced as part of learning and professional growth rather than avoided.

- Staff should take ownership of delivering work to the highest standard rather than relying solely on institutional change.

Student Perspective

Although focused on staff wellbeing, the discussion highlighted that thriving universities benefit both staff and students. Student voice was recognised as an important contributor to institutional improvement, with students viewed as capable partners rather than passive recipients of education. A positive organisational culture ultimately supports a stronger learning environment for everyone

Strategic Takeaway

The debate concluded that flourishing universities require intentional leadership, cultures built on trust and accountability, and genuine opportunities for staff and students to contribute to institutional improvement. While organisations have a responsibility to create supportive environments, individuals also play a vital role in sustaining high-performing, collaborative communities.

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