

Helping or Hindering: Are universities supporting students enough or too much?

Summary

The panel debated whether universities are striking the right balance between supporting students and encouraging independence. While several speakers argued that challenge is an essential part of learning, the consensus was that appropriate support enables rather than prevents independence. The discussion also focused on equality of access to support, student wellbeing, and the changing needs of today's university population.

Introduction

The debate explored whether higher education institutions are becoming too focused on student comfort or whether expanding support services are a necessary response to increasingly complex student needs. Panellists discussed academic challenge, wellbeing, accessibility, financial pressures, and how universities can prepare students for life beyond graduation.

The Panel

1. **Sir Michael Barber** - former Chair of the Office for Students
2. **Jenny Shaw** - Values-led leader in higher education and PBSA, with over a decade of senior experience in each sector
3. **Dr Paul Greatrix** Director of Higher Education Consultancy at Shakespeare Martineau, with over 35 years working in the HE sector
4. **Sophie Borman** - Development and Democracy Officer at KeeleSU
5. **Jim Dickinson** - Associate Editor (SUs) at Wonkhe

Chaired by **Professor Kevin Shakesheff** - Vice-Chancellor, Keele University alongside Zoe Garnett, Wellbeing Officer at KeeleSU. This debate was in association with KeeleSU and Keele Postgraduate Association.

Key Themes

a) Challenge versus comfort

- Universities should challenge students intellectually rather than prioritising comfort, as overcoming difficult learning experiences builds confidence and achievement.
- Support should enable independence rather than replace it, preparing students for professional environments where support systems already exist.

- Open debate, constructive disagreement and detailed academic feedback remain essential parts of the university experience.
- Universities must strike an appropriate balance between maintaining high academic standards and responding to students' wellbeing needs.

b) Equality and accessibility of support

- Student support should be accessible to all, particularly those who are least likely to seek help independently.
- Clear communication, inclusive services and accessible reporting processes are essential for ensuring equal opportunities.
- Today's students face increasing pressures including mental health challenges, financial hardship, caring responsibilities and an increasingly competitive graduate job market.
- Expanding wellbeing, financial and pastoral support reflects changing student needs rather than evidence that universities are becoming over supportive.

c) Equality and accessibility of support

- Student success should be viewed as a shared responsibility across academic staff, professional services and the wider university community.
- Universities require sufficient funding to maintain both high-quality teaching and effective student support services.
- The student experience should be shaped by educational value rather than financial constraints.
- Institutions should continue reviewing evidence and student feedback to ensure support meets the needs of an increasingly diverse student population.

Questions from the Audience

- How can lecturers feel comfortable academically challenging students while being judged through the National Student Survey?
- Who should provide additional funding for expanding student support services?
- Will Keele University act on the evidence discussed during the debate?
- Should the student experience be influenced by financial pressures?
- What does independence actually mean within modern higher education?

Arguments For and Against

Arguments for greater student support

- Support enables independence rather than replacing it (Borman).
- Universities should provide support comparable to modern workplaces (Borman; Dickinson).
- Student populations are more diverse and face greater financial and wellbeing challenges than previous generations (Shaw; Borman).
- Equal access to support improves educational outcomes (Shaw; Borman).

- Expanding support services reflects genuine increases in student need rather than excessive intervention (Greatrix).

Arguments for greater academic challenge

- Intellectual growth often comes through difficult learning experiences (Barber).
- Universities should not prioritise comfort over academic rigour (Shakesheff; Barber).
- Students benefit from constructive disagreement and critical discussion (Barber).
- Academics should not be discouraged from challenging students because of student satisfaction surveys (Greatrix).

Student Perspective

Several panellists argued that support should be viewed as a foundation for independence rather than a barrier to it. They emphasised that universities should challenge students intellectually while recognising the financial, mental health and social pressures affecting today's student population. Equality of access to support emerged as a recurring concern, particularly for students less likely to seek help independently.

Strategic Takeaway

The debate suggested that the question is not whether universities provide too much support, but whether support is delivered equitably while maintaining high academic expectations. Intellectual challenge and accessible support were presented as complementary rather than competing priorities. As Sir Barber concluded, British universities remain among the best in the world but require continued investment to maintain quality and support student success.

Inaya Choudhury, Keele University student