



## An update from John Vinney



Dear colleague

The summer is a busy time across BU, as exam boards complete their work, we prepare for confirmation and clearing and for the new academic year and work on research projects – and usually many of us try to take a break. This year nothing has changed; except that everything has. Although the uncertainty and restrictions may have affected our plans, it is important to make time to relax and take time away from work after the intense experiences of the last few months. Please do take a break this summer. If for any reason you do have not felt able to do this, speak to your line manager and make sure that you can plan some time off.

At this time of year, I would usually look back over the academic year. While our thoughts are dominated by what has happened since March, it was a busy and important year in many ways before the pandemic.

### **Learning and student experience**

In September, we were coming to terms with last summer's challenging NSS results. We set out our expectation then that we would achieve 90% plus for every undergraduate programme and similar levels of satisfaction for all our post-graduate students, and I asked every member of staff, in every part of BU, to commit, with energy and positivity, to a creative and inclusive approach to sustainable improvements in our student experience. I am delighted that this year our headline results have improved up against a declining sector average. Last year 18 programmes achieved 90+, and this year 22 programmes have achieved that milestone. 17 programmes have improved their overall satisfaction by at least 10% with three showing improvement of 30% or more. Although there is a long way to go before we achieve our aim, your hard work has had a positive impact in many areas. We continue to review the results and to plan for the action that we will all need to take this year to continue on this trajectory and build on this progress. Thank you for your contribution to this work over the course of this year.

As well as the NSS, we have also received the new [graduate outcomes data](#) and the [longitudinal educational outcomes](#) (LEO) data. We generally perform well in longer-term measures of graduate outcomes, and I am delighted that in the graduate outcomes survey we have done better than the sector average in terms of employment, highly skilled employment, and salaries. We were behind the sector average in the “student voice” measures, which is consistent with the NSS. The LEO data, which is by subject, also shows strong results in terms of employment and earnings for more than half of the subjects. Like the NSS there are differences across programmes and more analysis is required

to make sure we take the appropriate action. As noted below, the government is placing increased emphasis on these metrics as a proxy for excellence.

These metrics will influence the next set of league tables. In the meantime, the [Complete University Guide](#) was published in May. BU dropped 16 places, ranking 86th out of the 130 Universities listed. The relative fall is linked to a range of factors including our poor overall NSS results in 2019, our student/staff ratio and entry standards. The Times Higher Education released their [Young University Rankings for 2020](#) and I am pleased that we have been ranked equal 95<sup>th</sup> this year, the first time we have been placed in the top 100. Last year we were in the 101-150 group. Scores had improved in teaching reputation, doctorates awarded to academic staff, and the proportion of doctorates to undergraduate degrees.

We have spent the last months making rapid changes to respond to changing circumstances and this is likely to continue. However, we have learned a great deal over the last few months, including that we are able to be more agile and flexible than we thought we could be. Our [BU2025 outcomes](#) are more relevant than ever, and as we plan for the next academic year we are continuing to focus on ensuring that, in our new circumstances, the BU learning experience is personalised, inter-disciplinary and consistently excellent and that we have a diverse and inclusive environment that enables achievement for all, to highlight just two. Our academic principles also provide a useful guide as we make decisions about next year.

•**Campus Premium:**

A distinctive, high quality campus-based Fusion experience

•**International Profile:**

A distinctive, strong and internationally recognisable academic profile

•**Societal Contribution:**

All our activities are aligned to addressing and impacting societal challenges

•**Academic and Financial Sustainability:**

based upon known risk appetite, profitability and ensuring value for money

**Staff experience**

This has been a challenging time for everyone, and I want to thank you all for your patience resilience and hard work. I recognise the challenges that many of you have faced and continue to face in your personal as well as your work lives. We have put people, staff and students, at the heart of every decision we have made over the last few months and we have also prioritised communicating with staff in a very different way. As we prepare our phased return to campus, we are also reviewing how we communicate with you, and we would value your feedback on this. I have enjoyed trying new things, using video and podcasts, and taking the opportunity to connect with you more frequently.

During this time we have learned from necessity about prioritising and focussing on the most efficient way of working. Our Service Excellence team have been supporting the implementation of “lean” principles across BU. Lean is about simplifying and improving the way that we work for the benefit of

staff and students. Respect for people and a positive organisational culture is at the heart of this process, which supports our focus on excellence and teamwork in the BU2025 implementation plan. I invite you to look at the [material on the intranet](#) and follow up with Susanne and Camila on the development opportunities, which are open to all, and the changes you would like to make in your own area.

We have restarted our informal staff engagement sessions and have held two sessions so far using video and have had lively and interesting discussions with staff from across BU. I encourage you to sign up for them [here](#).

### **Returning to campus**

As we prepare to return to campus, your health and wellbeing are our priority. Please make sure you complete [the health screening tool](#) to help us support you. There is also an important mandatory training module that everyone will need to complete. I have been onto campus a number of times recently and even though it is quiet, it has been great to be back. For a time, this transition may feel strange, but I am confident that our community will take personal responsibility for our own wellbeing and that of others, comply with the guidance and ensure that our campus is as safe and welcoming as possible when we are able to return.

**Thank you also to those of you involved in clearing and confirmation this year, which will take place under different circumstances – please also remember the embargo on sharing information with students before results day.**

Some things will be different this year. I always say that November is my favourite time of year, but this year graduation is planned for March and we will not be able to hold our VC staff awards celebration in November. We will celebrate later in the year, and nominations will open for this year's VC staff awards very soon, with new categories for professional practice and support for the BU community. I am looking forward to reading your fantastic nominations this year. If you have been inspired by people outside BU, you can also make nominations for our honorary graduates for our Autumn 2021 graduation ceremonies now ([the form is here](#)).

### **External factors**

The external environment has been, and will continue to be, challenging for the sector and BU. We cannot be sure what this year's enrolments will look like, given the continuing uncertainty about government regulations, and restrictions that may apply to EU and international students. Thank you in advance to all our staff who will be dealing with student queries and supporting confirmation and clearing, arranging accommodation, enrolling students, and planning to support students who need to quarantine on arrival.

These continuing uncertainties mean that we need to maintain our focus on prioritising our use of resources and reducing pay and non-pay costs. Our budget for the next three years has been approved by the BU Board, and it requires us to continue to take a pro-active and responsible approach and respond to changing circumstances to ensure that we remain financially sustainable. Like many organisations in these difficult times, we have already started to reduce our staffing costs

through the voluntary severance scheme. I would like to wish all of those staff leaving us over the coming weeks all the best for their future. We expect we will need to go further in reviewing staffing. We are committed to open and transparent consultation on any steps we may need to take.

The policy environment for HE has also changed since the election in October 2019.

- We have been through a long period of uncertainty, as we have waited for the government response to the Review of Post-18 Education and Funding and the Augar report that informed it, and the independent review by Dame Shirley Pearce of the Teaching Excellence Framework, as well as the outcomes of the negotiations with the EU, including on participation in EU research and mobility arrangements. We expect many of these issues to be resolved later this year.
- The government position has become clearer, notably on the role of Further Education and their skills agenda linked to productivity and jobs. The government continues to focus on student information and choice, and excellence, and they have made it clear that they regard continuation and graduate outcomes as a useful proxy for excellence. This year we are also operating within [temporary student number controls](#).
- The OfS have introduced their [new regulatory condition on admissions](#), which applies to the next recruitment cycle as well as this summer, and they are consulting on student protection arrangements.

### Looking forward

[BU2025](#) has provided a clear sense of direction during these times. Although our lives, in work and outside it, will be different for a long time to come, I believe that in many ways we are stronger as an institution as a result of these experiences. The next few months are a “bridge” – an opportunity to connect back to the best parts of how we used to operate and to take forward the best parts of what we have learned during the lockdown.

Best wishes

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