The simple truth is that student engagement has never been more important or more challenging. During these historically difficult and tragic months, this pandemic age, it has been impossible to deliver anything close to a ‘normal’ student experience. New students have not enjoyed the normal excitement of freshers’ week, thriving clubs and societies, carefully structured academic inductions, the nerves and the thrill of new social groups, the multi-layered learning in lectures, seminars, practicals and tutorials, and the discovery of campus communities. Returning students have had to radically adjust their expectations, as one year that was hastily curtailed in extraordinary circumstances transitioned into a new academic year of ‘unknown unknowns’. And yet institutional life has had to continue. Education has remained a top priority for both policy makers and society more widely, and the challenge of engaging students amidst socially distanced teaching, rapidly constructed online modules, periods of self-isolation, tiered restrictions and COVID-lockdowns has been the lot of academic and professional colleagues alike.

Focusing on student engagement, this conference will be an important and very timely opportunity for the sector to come together to review where we’ve been and consider where next. Through the lens of leadership, we will discuss not only the challenges but also the opportunities presented by the COVID experience. What does leading engagement mean and how can we reboot our vision of student engagement as we build towards the 2021/22 academic year?

In many ways student engagement has become more critical than ever. The effect of COVID-19 has been to magnify and to amplify: to magnify existing inequalities and injustices, and to amplify the impact of both good and poor educational practices. One message from this is that good practices matter more than ever, and we must find ways to take those good practices into new and sometimes challenging teaching and student engagement scenarios.

Feelings of loneliness, alienation and disconnection are the opposite of what we would wish for our students at any time, but throughout most of 2020 we have been working with students who have been under enormous psychological pressure resulting from social restrictions, changes to education, having to stay in lockdown for prolonged periods of time, and the ever-present fear of contracting or passing on the COVID virus. The known elements of wellbeing have been under considerable strain. And even as society hopefully begins to emerge from this crisis, the scars to wellbeing may for some be long-lasting. This is the backdrop to student engagement as the sector moves forward.

This, then, is an important moment of leadership transformation as regards student engagement. We will hear from experienced leaders, look at what recent student surveys tell us, explore through interaction the nature of engagement and how it is evolving, and listen to panels of staff and students regarding new and emerging practices and priorities. We will ask the question, how can a crisis of engagement be transformed into a future of hope where students can grow, thrive and flourish?
Programme

9:30am  Platform opens & informal networking

10:00am Welcome
Advance HE

10:15am Keynote – Leading engagement – who are you engaging? How? And why is it more critical than ever?
Professor Anthony Smith, Vice Provost, Education & Student Affairs, University College London and Jim Onyemenam, Postgraduate Students’ Officer, Students’ Union UCL

10:45am Student Voices and delegate response
Self-filmed first and second-year students talk about higher education: what they like and what they would change (a 5 minute video) followed by Q&A

11.00am What our surveys tell us?
Dr Diana Pritchard, Principal Curriculum Developer, University of Bedfordshire - UKES

11.20am Q&A

11.30am Break

11.45am What is engagement and how is it evolving?
Interactive session

12.45pm Lunch

1.45pm The Big Conversation – What to do and what not to do for student engagement
Chair: Joan O’Mahony, Senior Advisor, Advance HE
2 student and 2 Staff panellists

2.45pm Break

3.00pm Parallel Workshops
- Engagement in the classroom focused on how students are engaged in high-quality learning
- Engagement in co-curricular and personal development opportunities focused on how students participate in student societies and personal development opportunities
- Engagement in institutional leadership and governance focused on how students involvement in the leadership and governance of the institution (whether at course or board level) is best enabled.

4.00pm Closing keynote

4:30pm Close