

*The Big Conversation: How will today's 8 year olds want to study in 2026 and what will they want to learn?*

Turning eight in 2003, I was acutely aware that the world as I knew it was changing; the immediate aftermath of the September 11, 2001 attacks was being felt on a global scale, and though I did not yet have the capacity to understand the intricacies of these changes, I was very much conscious of their existence. I expect that turning eight in 2017 is likely to have a very similar feeling – global, national and local politics have been consistently shattered by results that often feel like a retreat from progressiveness or prosperity, and it seems that even the grown-ups just don't know what is going on. It will be the role of the University in 2026 to welcome a cohort of young people whose age has denied them the skill, power or ability to influence current events, and to help them to instead understand actions that have been and actions that are undoubtedly to come.

This will no doubt coincide with a time in which personal identity is increasingly multifaceted and must be accounted for; the University has a responsibility to produce curriculums that invite and encourage the diversity of genders, sexualities, ethnicities, religions and financial statuses. Students of 2026 will not be satisfied simply with a handful of gender neutral toilets on campus, or a whitewashed academic staff. They will seek representation and diversity harder than ever in the study spaces as current politics seeks to undermine the existence of minorities – if indeed British students cannot pursue study in the EU as freely as our European neighbours, and vice versa, then it will be essential to ensure that the University does not decrease the value added by a dynamic and diverse international intake.

To study is to apply oneself to an academic discipline in the pursuit of improving one's knowledge and skillset, and it is this skillset that will more than ever be the demand of the freshers of 2026. The current saturation of the graduate job market and the stagnation of many young graduates in employment they are technically overqualified for, means that the freshers of 2026 will want their learning to be increasingly vocationally relevant to their post university employment experience. As a student of literature, for me this comes through increased focus on modern, culturally and technologically relevant and up to date texts, crossing genres and media to provide a grounding in issues beyond the world of academia. Across the humanities, it will be increasingly important to ensure that studies provide relevance to the ongoing tumultuous nature of politics, not only as it is performed in government buildings, but as it happens in offices, on the streets, and in the front rooms of homes across the world. The 2026 cohort will enter higher education as the inheritors of vast and chaotic political upheaval, and the University must educate them to survive and thrive in this aftermath.

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