

# RECONNECTING WITH STUDENTS

**Building Universities' Reputation Conference**  
**University of Navarra**  
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**Oxford Character Project**  
**University of Oxford**

The Oxford  
Character  
Project



# AN EMPHASIS ON CONNECTION

- **“We connect with our city”**
- **“We connect with employers”**
- **“We digitally connect”**
- **“We are globally connected”**

(Staffordshire University, 2021, p. 7)

## Connected University Strategy

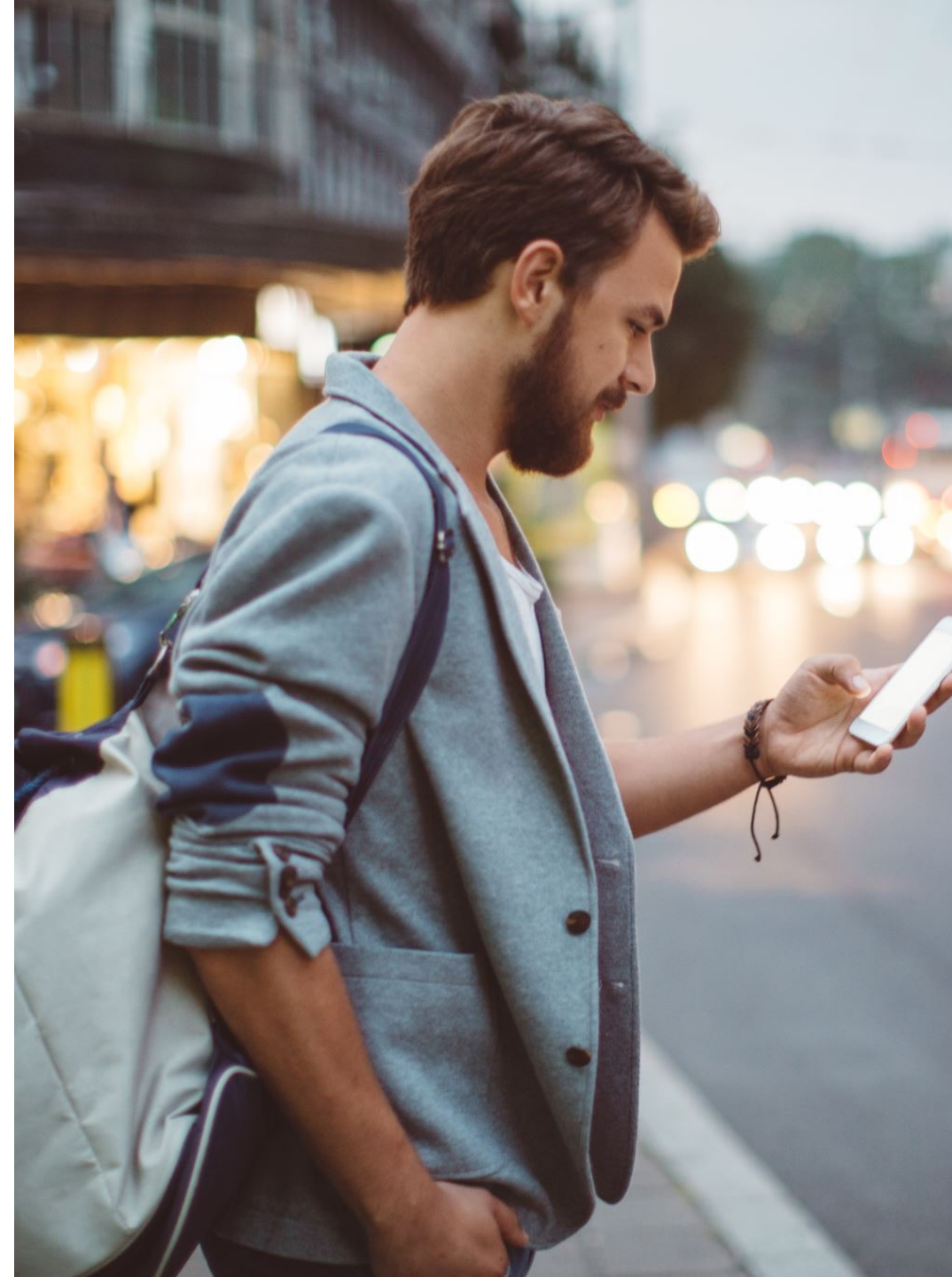


THE  
CONNECTED  
UNIVERSITY



# EXPERIENCE OF DISCONNECTION

- **26% of students reported feeling lonely “often or always” (8% in overall adult population)** (ONS, 2021)
- **In 2020, 37% of UK students reported declining mental health since starting higher education** (Randstad, 2020)





**“The pandemic has revealed the fact that the university is a community of fragile connections. Students have witnessed the shrinking of the university’s social and emotional dimensions and the university itself has been engulfed in a profound crisis. Strategies and projects are needed that bring back students’ belief in university education. How can universities rethink their relationship with students? What new forms of academic commitment and communication can we learn to begin the conversation with students again?”**



# **THE NEED TO RE-CONNECT**







A red robot arm is shown in the foreground, reaching towards the right. The background is a solid yellow color. In the bottom right corner, there is a black and white illustration of a gear mechanism. The text "CONNECTED TO WHOM AND FOR WHAT?" is written in white, bold, sans-serif font, centered over the image.

**CONNECTED TO WHOM  
AND FOR WHAT?**



A white wooden block with a star-shaped hole is positioned on a light blue grid background. The block is slightly angled, and its shadow is cast onto the grid below it.

# CHARACTER

A target with concentric rings of yellow, red, and green is shown. A dart is embedded in the center bullseye. The target is slightly out of focus, with the dart's shaft and fletching visible in the foreground.

# PURPOSE



**“A forward-looking intention to accomplish goals that are meaningful to the self and of consequence to the world”**

- 1. A meaningful goal**
- 2. Motivation to contribute**
- 3. Goal-directed activity**

**Heather Malin (2018)**



**Defining  
purpose**

A large, 3D white letter 'A' is positioned in the lower-left quadrant of the image. It has a textured, slightly grainy surface and casts a soft shadow onto the blue grid background. The grid lines are thin and light blue, creating a subtle pattern across the entire image.

# CHARACTER

To talk about character is to talk about **who you are** and how you characteristically **think, feel and act.**

Our character is shaped by the patterns of life, the people around us, the stories we tell, the spaces we inhabit, the highs and lows of our experience.

Character is at the heart of what it means to be human.



**Character is how you see the world around you and how you see yourself as you look in the mirror. Character is how you think things through; it determines the meaning you find, and sense you make of life. Character is how you feel more strongly about some things than others, more positively or negatively about some things than others. Character is how you act naturally; it shapes the way you respond to others and directs your steps through the world.**





# CHARACTER IS

**Complex** – a mosaic of different qualities

**Dynamic** – developed over time

**Rational** – a unity of thinking and action

**Reliable** – how we consistently think and behave

**Mixed** – describes both positive and negative traits

**Social** – shaped within cultural contexts

**Intellectual** – how we think

**Moral** – who we become

**Central** – the muscle that enables values to live



# 2 COMPONENTS OF CHARACTER

## THE **HEART** OF CHARACTER

Character has a motivational component. It is about our aspiration to be a certain kind of person – to live in accord with what matters to us and determine who we want to become.

## THE **ART** OF CHARACTER

Character has a skill component. It is about successfully acting on our values and concerns, especially under pressure. Character can be developed over time by way of intentional practice.

# CHARACTER AND PURPOSE IN UNIVERSITY EDUCATION

- “Universities are seeking to help students to *flourish* in an interconnected world
- Knowledge and skills are important but insufficient – we need also to focus on *character*, the human excellences that are at the heart of a flourishing life
- The cultivation of character is integral to the core research, education, and civic mission that universities share
- Character can be caught (through role-modelling) and taught at universities, but it should ultimately be sought by students themselves.”

(JCCV and OCP, 2020)

## Character Education in Universities

*A Framework for Flourishing*

### INTRODUCTION

When it comes to the value of higher education, increased earning potential and economic contribution are only partial measures. The value of a university education is evidenced in the lives of university graduates—their personal flourishing and their contribution to the good of society as a whole. It is seen not only in what students do, but also in who they become.

In recent years, many universities have expressed their commitment to a holistic, socially-engaged vision of higher education. Terms such as ‘fulfilling potential’, ‘flourishing’, ‘thriving’ and ‘well-being’, applied both to students and to university communities, feature prominently in policy documents and mission statements. Universities are increasingly talking about developing ‘graduate attributes’ and ‘21st-century skills’ – qualities necessary to navigate the fourth industrial revolution and contribute to a rapidly changing society.

“The aim of the Framework is to bring clarity to the idea of flourishing in higher education and the importance of holistic character development.”

In order to fulfil this ambition for higher education, the transmission of specialist knowledge and skills is important. However, a sole focus on knowledge and skills, often highlighted for their career and economic value, is not sufficient to achieve the aims that universities are setting themselves or the value that graduate employers and students are seeking. A vital third dimension is encapsulated by the interrelated concepts of ‘character’ and ‘flourishing’. Yet, despite efforts by some to give this holistic emphasis pride of place, its vocabulary does not come easily to everyone within higher education. There is a need to bring further clarity to a language that is still underdeveloped and imprecise.

The specific aim of this Framework is to help universities articulate and structure their mission to further the flourishing of their students and the holistic character development that is central to it. Given the acknowledgement that ‘universities shape lives’ and the fact that many universities already name specific character qualities they are eager to develop in their students under the rubric of ‘graduate outcomes’, this Framework does not seek to introduce an alien concept or radically new agenda. The purpose is to provide a conceptual taxonomy that situates and contextualises the cultivation of character and the objective of student flourishing as central to higher education today.

Listen to graduation speeches or scroll through university websites and mission statements, and it is clear that today’s universities, in all of their diversity, are eager to encourage students in directions that help them lead flourishing lives as citizens, professionals and human beings—lives that significantly contribute to the public good and provide an authentic sense of purpose and meaning. Universities recognise that the education they provide impacts on the character of their students in ways that transcend standard metrics. They are



# PEDAGOGICAL STRATEGIES FOR CHARACTER EDUCATION IN UNIVERSITIES



(Lamb, Brant, and Brooks, 2021)

# STUDENT PROGRAMMES

- Character and leadership
- Emerging adulthood
- Aspirational
- Relational
- Socratic
- Liberal arts
- Integrated with research







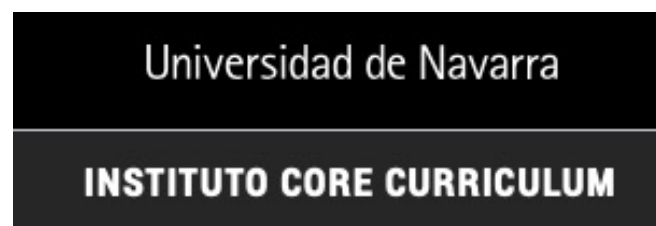
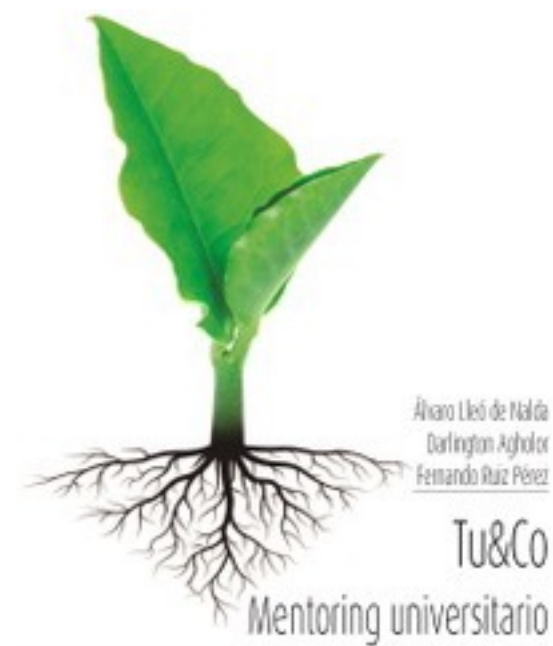




- "Who?" looks most like a leader?
- "Why?" does she/he look most like a leader?







**Thank you**

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