

## FBL 22nd June 2021 - Panel discussion

KAREN FOLEY: Welcome back to Student Hub Live, an event for the Faculty of Business and navigating the new normal. Well, we've had lots and lots of very interesting discussions. And we're going to end today's session by thinking about some of the take-home points that we can really take away from what we've been talking about here today.

So I'm joined by Christine Mera, Rebecca Kelly, Ash Odedra, and Andy Galloway, and of course, Emily, who is on our Chat desk talking to everybody at home. So we've covered lots of different topics. You'll recognise my guests, hopefully, from earlier.

Christine, my first question is to you. And I wanted to know how you thought the pandemic would affect business's attitudes to change in the longer term.

CHRISTINE MERA: I think that's a really good question. I think we've heard from people about how they've changed their professional lives. They've been in businesses that have changed their ways of working.

We've heard from students who've had to change their setups at home in order to manage work, life, home, everything together. So we've seen so much change is going on. And we've talked about these big societal changes, potentially legal changes, so many changes.

And businesses-- really, if they're going to succeed, we've been talking about the pace of change in business for so long now, but it is just speeding up dramatically. And it has sped up even more over the past 15 months. And we've all seen that the pandemic has forced businesses to really consider their position.

And we know that some businesses are desperate to just "snap back," as they call it, and get everyone back to the office doing the same things in the same ways. But we're also seeing that a lot of businesses are talking about a new normal, and they're talking about taking stock, thinking about actually what can they learn from this period, and how can they maybe adapt. And so I think generally attitudes to change are maybe more positive.

I think businesses are thinking actually, what can we learn? What can we do better? What can we take forward in terms of maybe ways of working, how we address markets, all sorts of different aspects. And also, how are we going to respond to any prospective changes in legislation?

Because that may well happen. And it has happened very rapidly, as we've seen. There's been some very quick changes that businesses have had to respond to there, that they weren't given any options. So yeah, I think the businesses that are forward thinking and have a really strong and positive attitude to change are going to be the ones that make it. And it doesn't really matter if they're big or small. We've

seen the restaurants-- they suddenly had to close, and they moved in to takeaway that they've never done before.

We've seen the large businesses start moving to home delivery because actually, they were very strongly based on the High Street, but they couldn't do that any further. So we we're seeing that there will be change, and there already has been change, and I don't think that change is going to stop. But we'll have to wait and see as well, won't we? It will be different for different industries.

KAREN FOLEY: Absolutely. Absolutely. Andy, Christine's talking about ways of working. And there's this whole notion that organisations may need to rethink some of the practises that they have. I wonder if you could share your thoughts in terms of this notion of being face to face, being in an office. Do you think people will get back to that as a new normal?

ANDY GALLOWAY: Yes and no-- an ambiguous answer for you. There's a little bit of both in this. My experience is many people want to get back into the office. They want to get back into the same room. There's a real appetite amongst employers to get people back to work if they can. Of course, there's all sorts of difficulties around this. And earlier this morning, we've talked about the complexities, and how COVID is still changing, and we don't know what the future is.

The fact is, we're social animals. We like each other's company. And a mechanism such as this, where we can see each other and talk to each other-- it's all very nice and it's all very pleasant.

But we crave the ability to get into the same room as people. I've met people who have been working for an organisation for the last year. They joined during the pandemic, and they still have to meet somebody that they work with. They've seen them on screen, but they don't know anything else about them. So yes, there is an appetite to get the people back, but it's not going to be the same. We cannot turn back the clock. February 2020, if we take that as our reset position, we just cannot reboot the system and go back to that.

The world has changed. Society has changed. And employment has changed.

Also, I think we have to take consideration of the fact that many organisations have invested heavily in new ways of working, and having made that investment, they're not going to jettison it just to bring people back into the office. I think we know that digitalization has been accelerated. Digital working would have happened anyway. Many organisations in the last decade have moved increasingly to file sharing, and getting rid of their paper files, and moving to online and cloud storage.

That has been accelerated because obviously, we have to share files online. But also the video conferencing suite is-- it would have happened. And it has been sort of growing momentum, actually really for the last 15 years at least. But I think it is now here to stay.

And where organisations are now paying a big licence fee to an online video provider, they're not going to cancel. Because there's also efficiency savings. I mean, we don't need to jump on a plane, as I said earlier. We don't need to.

I would have typically have spent a whole day travelling somewhere for a meeting that lasted between one and two hours. That's not efficient. It's not efficient use of my time.

So I think there is that element of no, we're not going back to the way things were, but there's also things we need to touch on. How do you on-board people? That's a real challenge.

How do you meet your team? How do you get together? How do you actually build that relationship with the rest of the people you work with?

And also, there's some real challenges that organisations are starting to struggle with. Not all training can be done online. There's mandatory training that needs to take place, and with a hands-on approach. People need to be in a room of a trainer or on a site with a trainer. It just all cannot be done digitally. So there is going to be those aspects of getting back face to face.

Certainly, I think if you look at Open University as an organisation, I think we've demonstrated that we went completely digital from a blended learning approach. All of us tutors are all itching to get back into a classroom and meet students face to face.

And we all look forward to the day we can do that. But I think the blend is the future. And so it's going to be a mix of both the old and the new. I think that's where the future is going to be.

KAREN FOLEY: So there have been a lot of shifts in terms of what we do and how we do it. But also, from a legal perspective, there are implications in terms of employees. Rebecca, I wonder if you might share your thoughts on what's happening right now in terms of furlough ending, and organisations really restructuring and rethinking who is essential in the workforce, and what that might mean perhaps in terms of potential redundancies as these businesses reshape the way that they operate.

REBECCA KELLY: Yeah, no, you're absolutely right. So yeah, in any period where there's significant change, redundancy is always something that is potentially more in focus. And there are actually, going back to what we were talking about earlier in terms of the quality issues and societal quality, some quite worrying developments potentially being seen.

So there's some research by the Citizens Advice Bureau looking into redundancies and people's views, and whether they're being targeted or how at risk they are. And there certainly appears to be some indication of a trend that there could be people who have perhaps been clinically vulnerable, people who have been caring for young children, or people at home, or people who have a disability, who are potentially being more often selected for redundancy processes.

There's also at least a perception that people who have made complaints about health and safety, or attempted to whistleblow about concerns, or perhaps asked for that flexible working that we were talking about in the earlier session-- they also consider that they have been targeted. So some quite interesting developments there. And that Citizens Advice Bureau reports an unequal crisis. It was published in 2020. It's actually got some really interesting insights in there. It's a really interesting read for people to reflect on.

KAREN FOLEY: But Rebecca, shouldn't there be laws that sort of prevent some of those unfairnesses being made? Isn't that what the law's there for, to protect the vulnerable?

REBECCA KELLY: That is also a very good point. And the answer is yes. We have, in theory at least, very strong legal protection against these things.

So in terms of selecting people for redundancy, there are certain things that would make it unfair. So for example, if they have been selected because of something to do with a disability inappropriately, or if they've made those requests for flexible working, or if they have raised concerns-- all of those types of things would be unfair reasons for selection. But there are issues, unfortunately.

It comes back to what we talked about earlier about the law in principle and the law in practise, so just how effective it actually is. So with a lot of the rights that we've been talking about in general today, including this, it is notable that there isn't a public enforcement body. So there isn't any centralised body that monitors labour practises, for example, in lots of the different areas.

What that means is that we tend to rely on individuals, hopefully maybe their unions as well, but individuals and their unions raising concerns, and doing so in an effective way. And that can take quite a lot of confidence on the part of individuals, particularly people who are vulnerable, perhaps in that less secure employment we've been talking about. Those are all factors in terms of people's confidence in actually raising these complaints.

And the other thing that's been a problem for a while is when it comes to actually making the complaints in a tribunal or in a court, there's historically been quite a big backlog in terms of getting these things dealt with. And unfortunately, the pandemic has only actually increased the backlog. So there is a very large number of claims that needs to be made, and while people are waiting to make those claims, assuming that they're confident enough to do so, we could be getting gaps in terms of the justice system actually providing the protection that we want it to.

So it comes back to our age-old question-- the law is really about society and how well we respect things. The law is there is that the last resort. It sets the basic requirements, as we said, but even when it comes to the law, we need to question whether or not it's actually been enforced correctly, whether the justice system is working correctly for everybody, or what the bigger impact is on an equal society and the rule of law and justice.

KAREN FOLEY: Ash, I wonder if you want to expand around what Rebecca's been talking about.

ASH ODEDRA: Yeah, I think she raises some really important points, especially with respect to the individual. So far, we've heard lots of things about the economics of this and government control. We really have to be really mindful of whether or not we're drifting into a position where our rights and the rights of the individual are being compromised.

Because fear is a powerful weapon here. And if people are scared, lots of things can happen. And we can suddenly find ourselves in a situation where we are legislating, but we are not really talking to people. If this is driven by business, and driven by politics, and driven by the immediate concerns of opening all of these things up-- the economy, et cetera-- and we've seen some interesting political leniencies even in government. We've got the Labour and the Conservatives working together to try and secure lots of rules on this, that affected all of our freedoms. And within the parties themselves, we're seeing people who are more reluctant and looking after civil liberties, championing the rights of the individual for them to choose. And ultimately, this is just going to potentially lead to further discrimination that was already there in the past.

KAREN FOLEY: Absolutely. And lots of different feelings coming up about this. Sara said some people are anxious about travelling and mixing with people. So for some individuals, there's a real anxiety around just getting out and about.

But for other people-- I mean, Joyce is saying that before the pandemic she knew a few people, but after the pandemic she met lots of new people. And it's made her feel really good about that. And then also thinking about some of the skills, Lynn says, "I think young people at a school and university need human and face-to-face interaction in the workplace to develop some of the untaught skills that they may have missed out on as a result of being isolated," so that they can get experience from watching how the pros behave, I guess, in the workplace.

So there are various things that can be unaccounted for within that, so lots of stuff going on from our audience, and we'll return to that a bit later. Ash, just still continuing that notion about individual rights, because we've just been in a really interesting discussion about vaccination passports. And I wondered what your thoughts were in terms of some of the key challenges that the government may meet in terms of shaping a pathway out of the pandemic.

ASH ODEDRA: Well, I wouldn't want to be in the government's position, because what we know is needed or what the government feels is needed, what everybody wants-- everybody wants a clear pathway. That's not the issue here. It's how we go about it, and what rights and restrictions we trade off in order to secure those rights, to open up that pathway.

And whilst we might have laws put in in the short term, we've got to be thinking about the long term. It's very easy for us to sleepwalk into a situation where we're expecting people to be vaccinated, we're expecting people-- it becomes a requirement, all of these things become a requirement in order to get

back into the workplace, in order to travel. We've really, really got to be thinking about the longer-term impacts of this.

And I think that's where the challenges lie. There are lots of people who still object to restrictions in the debate that we had about vaccinations, whether it's on cultural or religious grounds. And those people are going to be suffering because there will be, again, potential discrimination happening.

KAREN FOLEY: Absolutely. I wonder, Rebecca, if you might like to pick up on any of those points.

REBECCA KELLY: In terms of the-- so yes, it is an interesting one, how as a society we go forward and try to stop some of these divides from actually essentially separating us further. And I think Ash makes a very important point-- that actually some of these things existed before the pandemic. It's just that the pandemic has perhaps exacerbated how some of these things have been perceived and perhaps how dramatic some of those divides actually are.

I think a point that was picked up by a Charlotte earlier is perhaps the education side of things. So in terms of anything that is pushed from the governments, I think that will probably only have to be done potentially as a last resort, really. If we look at the law around this area, forcing people in particular directions tends to only be done where education hasn't managed to bring the risks down to an acceptable level for everybody.

So I think the key thing going forward is how we make sure that the messages that people are receiving are accurate, that people are confident in raising questions, raising concerns, and just the general idea that everybody feels like they're being represented and involved in the decision-making process, whether that happens centrally, in particular business areas or particular regions as well. And it's a really important thing that society is thinking about at the minute.

And actually, digitalization has the potential to open up people's involvement in those types of things in quite exciting ways. It really is a massive time of change for business, but also society as a whole. And it's going to be really, really exciting to see what happens.

KAREN FOLEY: And that relates to those issues we were talking about earlier, about the changing nature of business needs, and how organisations really need to work with employees, that notion we were talking about earlier about well-being being so paramount as one of the, perhaps, areas that we hadn't considered as much of in the past before, but that that's absolutely pertinent now. Andy, Christine, I wonder if you might want to come in on that point. Christine.

CHRISTINE MERA: Oh, yeah, I think I'm really picking up what Rebecca was saying about having more involvement, and letting everyone be part of the decision making. They may not be able to sway the decision making. They may not have a loud enough voice, but for everyone to feel that they've had their say and that they've been included, I think, is really important from a business lecturing perspective.

I think of the stakeholder view, where we try to get as many different stakeholders represented, have their opinions in play so that a better decision can be arrived at. You do better decision making when you know what everybody might feel about it, rather than wait for the fall-out afterwards. And I think it's difficult because at the moment, a lot of decisions have had to be made very quickly. But yes, digital technology really facilitates us all to be involved, and to have a say, and hopefully, have the channels to have a say formally as opposed to maybe in our own social media, little echo chambers, but to have a formal say in a more representative and more sensible way.

KAREN FOLEY: And we certainly have lots of different opinions from people at home today in terms of some of the topics we've discussed. Emily, I wonder if we might come to you just for some final thoughts as we're going to close the event today, and just see how everyone is doing at home. And also, if you haven't voted on Map to let us know where you are, please do that so that we can see where the viewers are. And final call to add some of the things that you're going to take away or things that you've learned from this session also. Emily.

EMILY: Hi. Yeah, this has been a fascinating session, not only thank you to the speakers, but also just the chat that it's generated. So it's really great as well that everyone's been coming forward with lots of varied opinions-- so people who understandably are really, really enthusiastic about everyone taking the vaccine, as I think we all are, but then again, looking at the other side of things, the fact that we have to have a conversation, so not vilifying people for their opinions, that sort of thing.

But yeah, in terms of some interesting comments I wanted to mention, David also mentioned-- and this isn't something I'm familiar with, but he was talking about the Equality Act and the fact that if we implement legislation and there is any form of discrimination, some of the processes-- I mean, we have to follow these processes. But as you've been saying, it's not straightforward. It's something that we can try and argue our case, but it's not foolproof.

There can still be cases of discrimination where people maybe aren't heard. So I guess from what everyone's saying, it's a work in progress. And just to sum up, Jeanette said, and I agree completely, "There are no easy answers. We're learning every day and adapting to changes as they come along." I think that sounds like a really, really reasonable response, Jeanette. So thank you.

KAREN FOLEY: Absolutely. There's been some brilliant discussion as well. And we can have a look at some of the things that you're going to take away from today's session in our widget. So we're going to look at what three things you're going to take away today.

Let's see what you have to say. So many different things. The key thing is about information, meeting tutors, appreciation of biscuits. Yes, I think they're very important. I certainly enjoyed mine in the break. Students' perspectives, being inspired, views of tomorrow, new perspectives, and most importantly, it seems, meeting other students, and meeting people, gaining ideas, student's sociability, motivation for tma-- that's great-- insight to learn, to feel connected, and to feel heard, which I think is really, really important. So I hope that you've gained a lot from today's session.

And we're also going to look at what you've most enjoyed from the sessions, so do fill those remaining widgets in if you haven't already done so. But that's absolutely fantastic, Emily. And thank you so much for all your conversations with everybody at home. It certainly has been a very interesting discussion. So let's see what you most enjoyed from this session. I think we've got one more widget to show people here. So what are you going to take away from the event?

Here's what you said-- the key things were flexibility, but also about feeling connected, feeling heard, sense of community, which is wonderful, an ethical perspective, value of diversity, remote working preparedness, joys of listening, a desire to learn, overcome challenges and sense of thinking, digitalization fairness, and embracing the new normal, which I think is a lovely note to finish on from that. So I think that it's been a really interesting discussion. And thank you to our panel, Christine, Rebecca, Ash, and Andy, and of course, Emily, and everybody at home.

We've also, on the Chat, had George and Katrina, who have been doing a fantastic job keeping everybody entertained throughout today's session, where we've all been expressing a variety of different views. And I hope you found today's session very useful. Vanessa, I know, has been putting a link to the survey in the Chat.

We just have a very quick survey. We like to know what you think. You can also send us any feedback to [studenthubopen.ac.uk](mailto:studenthubopen.ac.uk) if there's anything else you'd like to look at.

We run many, many events throughout the academic year. Some are faculty based, like today's one has been. Tomorrow, we have an event for another faculty, being Education, Language, and Sport, where we're taking a look at resilience. We'll also be talking a lot about lockdown.

Everybody is welcome to any of these events. So if you've enjoyed talking today, you might like to come along tomorrow. See the website for more information.

We also have a lot of study skills workshops that we held in our tutorial space, Adobe Connects. And there's hour-long structured workshops that look at everything from critical thinking to planning, and writing, and time management. So do make sure you check those out.

You can also go onto our mailing list, where you'll find out monthly about what we've got in store for you. So do make sure that you check your email on that in the website if you'd like to be involved also. So on behalf of everyone here at Student Hub Live, I'd like to say thank you all very, very much for coming along today. I hope you've enjoyed it.

The caption of the videos will be available soon. And thank you so much for all being such a wonderful, friendly bunch of people. It has been really, really lovely to connect with you here today. I'll see you very soon. Bye for now.

[MUSIC PLAYING]