

Steps on my journey to become Vice-Chancellor of Middlesex University

Professor Shân Wareing's inauguration speech on 15 January 2025

Welcome to our guests

Thank you to Dame Janet and to our Chair, Rebecca Lawrence, and welcome to all our honoured guests, including The Worshipful the Mayor of the London Borough of Barnet, Councillor Tony Vourou, and his wife Caroline, and Martin Russell, Representative Deputy Lieutenant for the London Borough of Barnet.

Also to all our partners and supporters of the university who are here this evening, welcome! We're joined by representatives from London Borough of Barnet, schools, colleges, faith groups, employers and charities. We welcome friends and partners from the higher education community, and from other sectors. Welcome to members of our Board of Governors, to university staff and students, and welcome to my own family and friends. Thank you all for coming.

Universities are of course primarily communities, with a reach that extends across generations, and beyond national borders. I am therefore delighted to be joined this evening by Professor Mari Jansen van Rensburg, Pro Vice-Chancellor and Director of our Mauritius campus, Professor Cody Paris, Deputy Director of our Dubai campus, and Michael Grabner from our Austrian partner, KMU. We are proud to be a global university and our international reach enriches us. You symbolise our international presence as you join us here today and we're especially grateful since you've joined us from much sunnier and warmer climates!

Universities have many roles in society, but educating students is always the start, and is our dominant purpose. I am delighted that this evening's event includes our students and representatives of our Students' Union.

Maybe you haven't been to a Vice-Chancellor's inauguration before! Today's ceremony marks the start of a new era for the university as well as a new beginning for me as Vice-Chancellor. I'm going to talk with slides for about 25 minutes about my personal journey, what drew me to Middlesex, and what I hope for the future for this University community.

My first full time job

Many of you have supported me in my journey to stand here with you today, and I have learnt a great deal from many in the room at different times. It's really important to me that you've made the trip to be here this evening.

More than 30 years ago, I started my first full time lectureship, at what is now the University of Roehampton, teaching English Literature and Linguistics, in fact, in an office next door to one of tonight's guests, Dame Professor Janet Beer. I rapidly became aware of how

complicated and exciting teaching is, and I felt underprepared. As I tried to become a better teacher, I found out that learning and teaching at university level were not usually seen as proper subjects of academic enquiry, unlike teaching at school level. Students wanting to become primary and secondary school teachers studied teaching at Roehampton and at many other universities.

In the last decade or so of the twentieth century, learning in Higher Education was often understood as a kind of osmosis, a physical absorption of information by students as long as they were in the same room as the lecturer. There was at least one often repeated joke about this – that a lecture is a process that allows information to pass from the notes of the lecturer to the notes of the student without passing through the minds of either.

I was driven by a belief that we all have potential to learn and develop and a wish to teach better. I was curious about how we develop as teachers, and - this probably won't surprise my husband and children - I was very cross that some authority had defined what was worthy of study, and had ruled my interests unworthy.

So I channelled my indignation, not for the first or last time, into activity, and I applied my education, for which I am endlessly grateful, and my research training as a PhD student, to the task of understanding learning and teaching better.

The slide shows me being awarded my PhD in sociolinguistics from Strathclyde University. I think you can get a sense from that photo of the extent of my surprise and relief at having got it over the line!



Vice-Chancellor Inauguration 2

Learning and teaching as a subject of study

I began to work to do my bit to change the way we value learning and teaching in higher education, to see it as an academic discipline in its own right, that we might look at ourselves and our own practices as subjects of study and improve. I joined SEDA, the

wonderful Staff and Education Development Association, where I met people who cared as deeply as I did about how students learn and how to develop teaching.

The slide shows Professors Paul Bartholomew, Claire Taylor, and Julie Hall. The four of us are the first Vice Chancellors in the UK, as far as we know, with specialisms in education development and learning and teaching and I'm delighted Professor Julie Hall, VC at London Metropolitan University, has joined us this evening. I gained my SEDA Fellowship, joined the SEDA executive committee and served, as Julie did, a term as Co-chair.

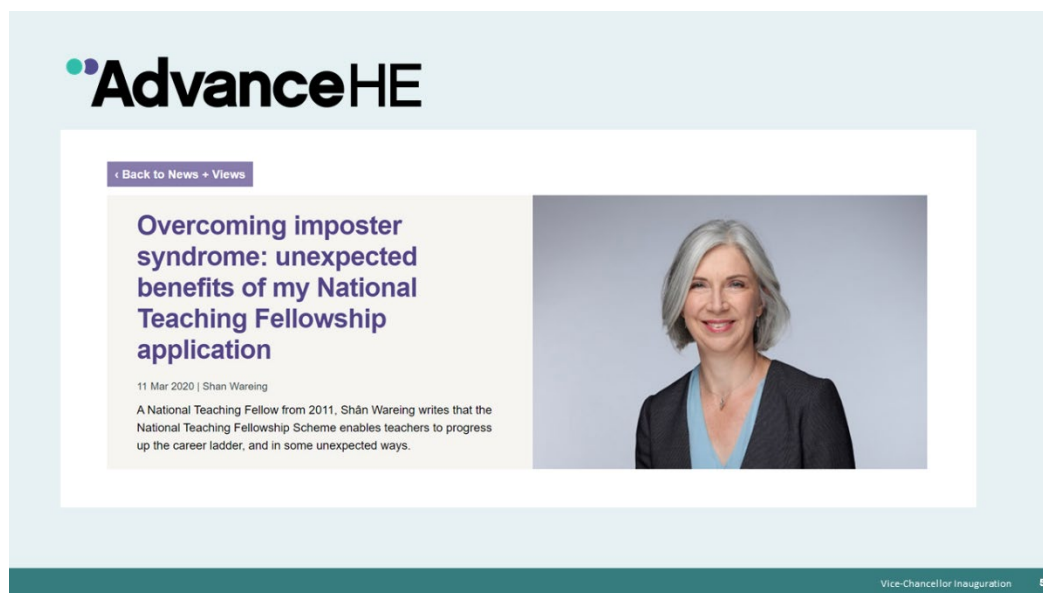


I published in my original discipline of linguistics and literature, and I gradually started to publish about education, on topics such as whether students learn differently in different subjects. *This slide shows some of my publications. Can you spot the odd one out? At top left is not something I've written but something I knitted! It's my daughter's cardigan which I finished in lock down and posted on twitter where it was spotted by the editor of this journal.*



*There is actually another contender for the odd one out in this image, third from the left, top row. I contributed a case study to Graham Gibbs' pithily titled publication, *Implications of Dimensions of Quality in a Market Environment*. Graham was a leading light in educational development in the '90s and early 2000s, and I was very flattered he was interested in the changes I made to assessment practices at the University of the Arts London, which lifted all the National Student Survey questions on assessment and feedback by 12% and which remained in place in the university for over a decade, long after I'd left. Anyway, it turned out Graham didn't like the way I'd done it and wrote up the case study saying it was the wrong kind of change and wouldn't have worked at a better university! Cheeky blighter! So I keep the publication as a trophy to the wrong kind of change.*

I was awarded a National Teaching Fellowship in 2011, *as you can see on the next slide*, a Professorship in Teaching in Higher Education later that same year, and became a Principal Fellow of the Higher Education Academy a couple of years later.



Making changes through leadership

And just like that, the years rolled by, and my questions about how we teach better, became questions about how we lead better, about how universities make decisions and allocate resources, why executive teams appeared to tolerate fractured, inefficient, ineffective systems and how to make those systems better, about how we bring the best out in the people we work with, and this became my next topic of study. I published on building teams, on equality, diversity and inclusion, and on gender and leadership, *on the impact of technology on education and professional services, as you can see in these slides*, and I gave presentations on transformational organisational change, digital developments, and *once, on whether Star Wars holds the secrets of the future of academic libraries.*



Digital Higher Education



Chapter 26: Digital education: less change and more change than predicted

Shan Wareing

Restricted access

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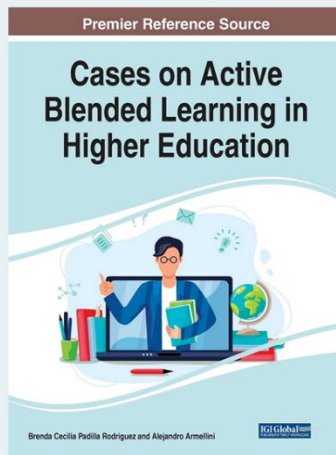
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Abstract

This chapter explores some of the reasons why learning and teaching will change less than often predicted, despite experiences of learning and teaching online during the COVID-19 pandemic, and why professional services will change more. Technology can make it possible for more learners to participate in higher education, resulting in improvements in who can access higher education, and can enhance student engagement and achievement. Nevertheless, learning and teaching have been, and will continue to be, enabled by technology rather than transformed by it. Face-to-face higher education with face-to-face learning and teaching, augmented with digital, will remain a highly valued and the preferred model. On the other hand, university professional services will increasingly deploy digital systems to become more fit for purpose and efficient. To do this effectively, they will need to undergo fundamental and revolutionary changes, in culture and structure. The first half of this chapter discusses why learning, teaching and assessment will change less than many predictions have claimed, and the second half will consider why professional services will change more, with a case study to illustrate some of the drivers and some of the challenges.

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Blended Learning



Chapter PDF Available

Measuring the Success of Active Blended Learning

February 2021

DOI: [10.4018/978-1-7998-7856-8.ch015](https://doi.org/10.4018/978-1-7998-7856-8.ch015)

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In book: Cases on Active Blended Learning in Higher Education (pp.291-302)

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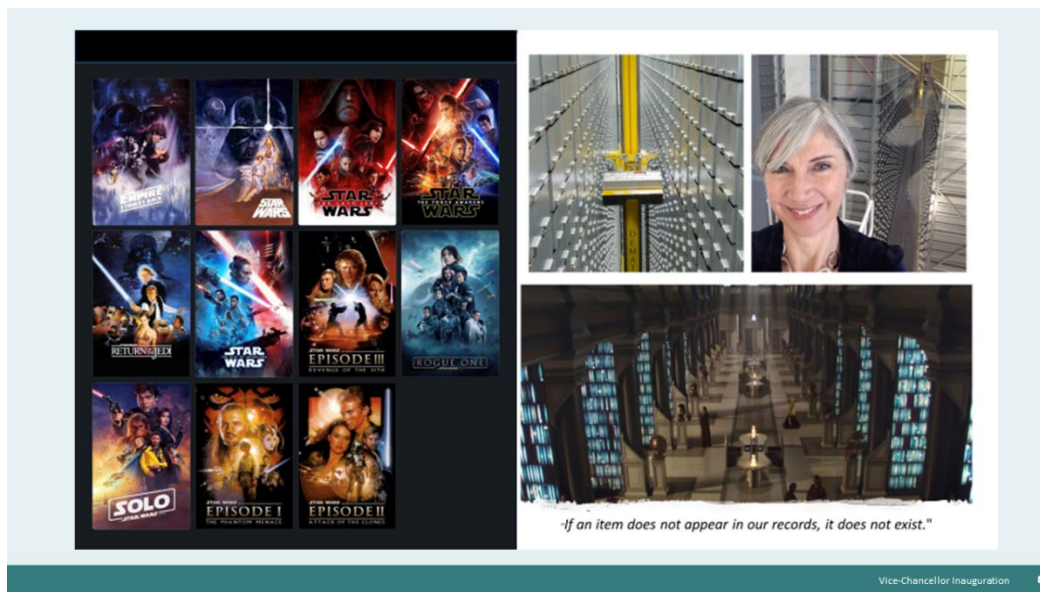
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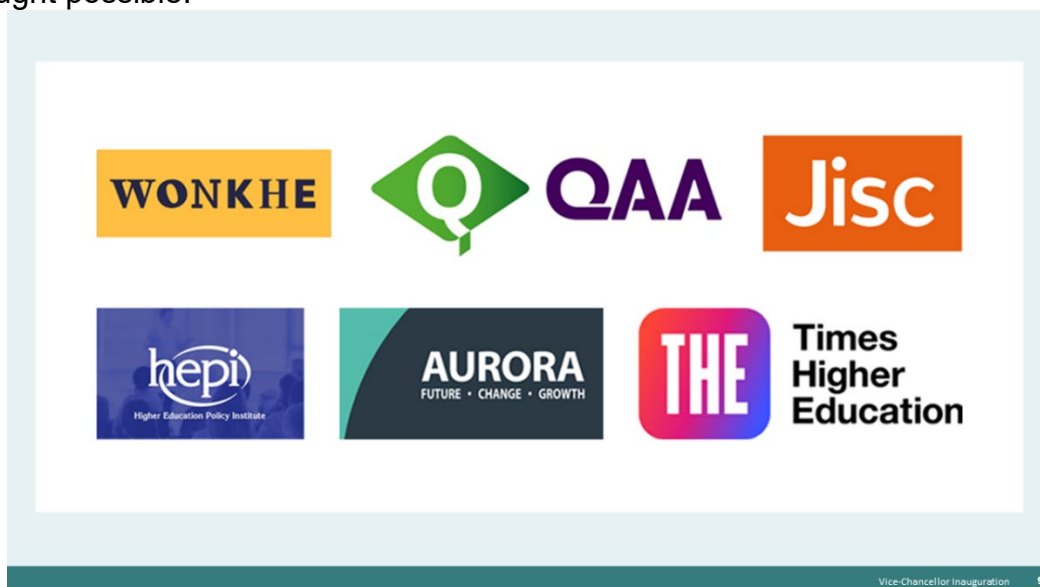
Citations (2)

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I wanted to make changes in higher education through leadership and I also wanted to change leadership itself: who leads, how we lead, and why we lead. Through contributing to courses such as Aurora run by the national organisation *Advance HE*, and through platforms such as *Wonkhe*, *Times Higher Education* and the Higher Education Policy Institute I was able to enter dialogue with the wider sector about how we understand leadership, about who obtains leadership positions, and how it could be different. And this was always inherently connected to my original goal, of wanting to learn from others, to share what I was learning with others, and to enable others to grow, and achieve more than they thought possible.



My experiences in competitive sport

To give a fuller picture of what I was doing all this time though, I should add that in parallel to studying and working, I took up competitive sport as an undergraduate and that this profoundly affected my choices and opportunities afterwards.

Rowing as you can see on this slide was my first significant experience of being part of a team, and one of the ways I found out that I really could go further than I ever thought possible. My Students' Union colleagues know that I profoundly support opportunities for students to participate in sport. Alongside all the direct benefits of strength and fitness, university sports offer the chance to develop the skills which come from organising minibuses and collecting kitty money, voting committee members in (and out!), and managing your time when exams and regattas coincide. I began to understand leadership, resilience, and the concepts of capital investment and depreciation as a result of being on the Boat Club Committee.



Vice-Chancellor Inauguration 10

I rowed for Oxford against Cambridge, in the University second women's eight and earned a half blue, and I rowed in the fastest women's college boat in Oxford in 1986. I'm the third rower from the left in the colour photo of an eight, and third from the top in the black and white photo.

If you know Oxford you might recognise the left-hand photo as the river Thames taken from Donnington Bridge, and you can see our supporters running along the towpath in the College colours of red and black. Our eight rose from 5th place to Head of the River in 2 days, which gave me the opportunity to return to Donnington Bridge one evening with some pots of paint and brushes to participate in what you might call graffiti as shown on *this slide* but which I believe can more correctly be described as 'Authentic student generated social media content'!



Authentic Student Generated Social Media Content

Vice-Chancellor Inauguration 11

I developed a love of sports which has never left me even though I no longer row. *I now run, and you can see me in action on this slide.*



Vice-Chancellor Inauguration 12

My experience of competitive sport was that there came a time when the effort of learning how to sit so the boat is balanced and how to hold the blade, the pain of building muscles, all fell away in the pleasure of effort translated into boat speed, when movement became fluid and easy, and the discipline of practice was a joy and not a burden. I learnt, through rowing and running, that even if it seems impossible at the start, there can be a grace and a satisfaction in applying a skill well, even in difficult situations, and this is a belief I carried from sports into my professional life.

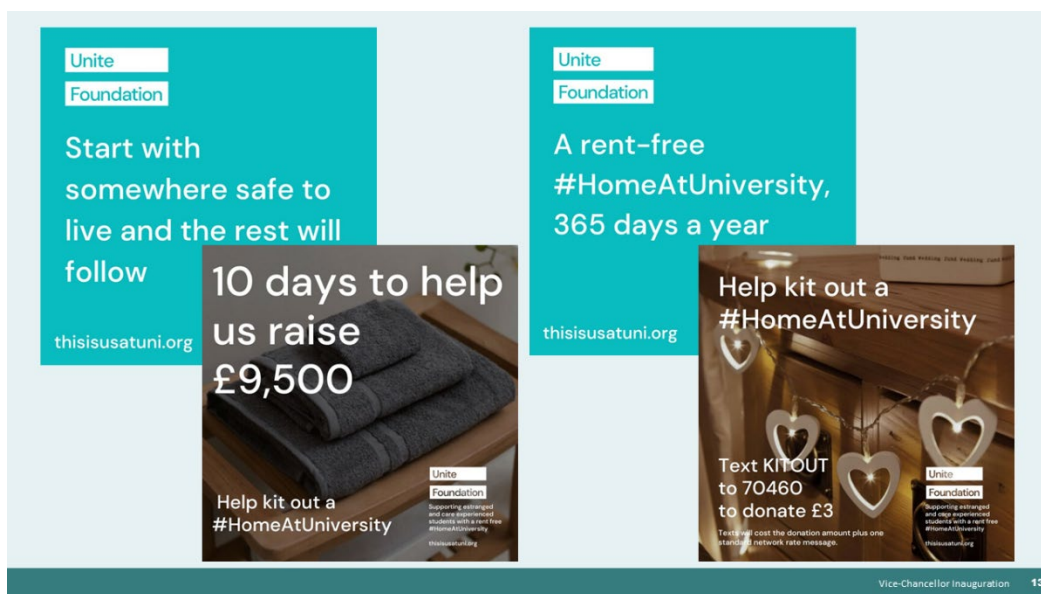
The importance of resilience, flexibility and support

Participation in competitive sport and leadership require resilience. Resilience is not something we just have, it's something we work on. My journey has not always been a

linear path and not everything went to plan. There've been lows as well as highs and painful though they are at the time, in hindsight it's clear the lows are often the places we learn most, about focussing on what we care about, developing new skills and trying new directions. I'm standing here today not because everything went to plan but because sometimes it didn't. One of my messages to students is that in addition to making plans, be prepared to be flexible, looking for the door that opens when another one closes. And don't be afraid to lean on others. No one gets there alone; we just need to remember who helped us, and pay forwards by helping others on their journeys when we get the chance.

I've been helped and supported on my way by many people, some here today, some not. And being aware of the opportunities education opened up for me, through qualifications and through access to sport, I am profoundly aware of my responsibility to protect those opportunities for other people, especially anyone for whom the path to education may involve more obstacles.

My day job has always been linked to access to education and to supporting academic success, and it's a privilege to serve on the Board of Trustees for *Unite Foundation*, a charity which provides homes at university for students who have been in care or are estranged from their families.



Far fewer students who are care experienced or estranged go to university than from the wider population, and those who do go are less likely to complete their awards or achieve to the same level. Unite Foundation research shows that students with a home at university through a scholarship have the same likelihood of completing their awards with the same outcomes as all other students. If you don't have family support you lose out on financial help, on always having a safe place to live outside term time, and on having a buffer between finishing education and starting full time paid work. Real and pressing as these challenges are, just as profound is that your resilience can really take a hammering if your family don't support you.

Some of the most overwhelmingly proud and moving moments in my career have been seeing students who have achieved academic success and fulfilling careers, where that had seemed out of reach for them, and listening to their accounts of how higher education changed their lives. *There have been lots of these moments at Middlesex already, during graduation ceremonies in Hendon, Mauritius and Linz in Austria, in our celebrations of 20 years of Middlesex in Dubai, and in conversations with students since I joined the University. I'm so delighted that some of our honorary awardees who gave moving speeches at our summer graduation ceremonies are here tonight.*





The path to my role at Middlesex

So how did my path lead to Middlesex? From my first visits to this campus, I have found so much in common between my own sense of what's important, and what drives me, and the purpose and mission of the Middlesex University community, and this is something which has intensified with time.

I see a shared belief that we all have potential to learn and develop and that we have the right to succeed whoever we are and wherever we're coming from. I see a drive to understand and improve students' learning and experiences. I see a focus on building resilience in our students, in our people, and in this organisation, so that we are equipped to make our future. I see a belief that we, this university, these students and staff members, can go further than we thought possible. And when I think about how we will shape our future, I see a shared commitment to making positive change and to adapt, and I glad that I can make my own contribution in this new role.

Honouring the University's history

I'm going to spend a few minutes describing some of the strengths of Middlesex to explain why this community and this role are so important to me

Middlesex University has a long and honourable record of service and transformation. We were founded in Tottenham nearly 150 years ago, as St. Katharine's College, a teaching training college, preparing young women to teach in London's charity schools. We also developed from the Hornsey College of Art, founded in 1880 to teach fine art, advertising design, and industrial applied art, and from the Enfield and Hendon Institutes of Technology. We became Middlesex Poly in 1973, and became a university in 1992. In the last 20 years we've opened campuses in Dubai, Mauritius, and most recently, China.

Middlesex University today provides a wide range of disciplines underpinned by research, which we believe is particularly important for our local communities. Students who want to

stay at home to study can come to their local provider, and chose subjects and routes aligned to their interests and their passions and to their own picture of their future. We believe graduates in all disciplines make valuable contributions to society and the economy.

Making an impact locally and globally

Our local mission is strengthened by our global presence. We bring together people from across the world, doing our part to address global challenges including poverty and inequality, climate change and environmental degradation, and supporting peace and justice.

Our research, and knowledge exchange contribute to resolving problems in the world around us, based on the framework of the United Nation's Sustainable Development goals. And through researching areas of common interest, we strengthen our relationships with businesses, professions and charities, with local and national government, and with our neighbouring education providers.

The partnerships and relationships we have with professions and employers help make sure our courses up to date and relevant to the world our graduates will work in and shape.



We prepare our students to succeed in their chosen careers, and beyond that, to shape the futures of their professions, and areas of work. When I arrived here for my interview almost a year ago, I was really impressed when the student panel told me about how Middlesex had given them a chance to develop as leaders. This is such an important aspect of our approach, because today's students are our future and they will shape our world. Social mobility isn't achieved through access to graduate work, it's achieved when any student can access local higher education and has the chance to rise to the top of their particular career ladder.

You can see some examples of our work in our leaflet 'An anchor institution in our community'.

The future for Middlesex

I'm sure everyone here today knows these are turbulent and challenging times for Higher Education in the UK. Finances are and will continue to be constrained, requiring fundamental changes in the way we work. And yet the number of young people in the UK population still grows, and we struggle with national staff shortages in areas where we need educated workers.

Despite the churn in our environment, the purpose of Middlesex University remains crystal clear, and closely aligned to this government's agenda. The Education Secretary has called on the sector for reform, focussing on five priorities. She asked us to play a stronger role in expanding access and improving outcomes for disadvantaged students; to make a stronger contribution to economic growth; to play a greater civic role in our communities, to raise the bar further on teaching standards, and for all of this to be underpinned with a sustained efficiency and reform programme.

These five priorities are already inherent in our work, so for us the Education Secretary's call to action is as much an opportunity as a challenge. We have refreshed our University Strategy to reflect the external environment, and to re-emphasise the alignment of our mission to the government's agenda.

We will use the government's call to action to sharpen our focus on these five areas.

Our commitment to the community

Higher education is sometimes called an individual good. I have received immense benefits from my own education, and I have endeavoured to support others in achieving their potential. And HE is also a public good from which we all benefit – it underpins our collective prosperity and productivity, our services, and our professions. It supports culture and the arts, and the UK's reputation overseas.

For all these reasons and more, I am proud to work in higher education and specifically here at Middlesex. I hold this position as Vice Chancellor in stewardship. Even a long term in office for a vice chancellor is a relatively short time in the lifespan of a University. For this time that I have, I will endeavour to strengthen the university and its status as an anchor institution. I will honour our commitments:

- To educate local people so they can access graduate level work and careers, contributing to their prosperity and that of their families, to their choices about their work, to their wellbeing, and to their satisfaction with their lives.
- To support local employers to recruit, retain and develop graduates with the knowledge and skills that they need



- Working with local government, charities and employers, to help make the communities where our campuses are welcoming, inclusive and inspiring places to visit and to live, study and work in.

These commitments are our responsibility and they are our sources of professional and personal satisfaction. Thank you for joining me here today, and thank you for being part of one more step in Middlesex University's history and future.