



Nous Group University COO Survey

Building the ~~plane~~ plan while flying it:
the challenges of a contemporary
university COO

28 April 2022

About the survey

This report was made possible thanks to over 70 university COOs from across Australia, Canada, Ireland, New Zealand, and the UK. We are extremely grateful for the time and expertise that was so willingly provided.

The inaugural Nous Group University COO Survey ran from December 2021 – January 2022 via an online questionnaire that was sent to Chief Operating Officers and equivalents at universities and post-secondary institutions across Australia, Canada, Ireland, New Zealand, and the UK.

Survey results were supplemented by additional in-depth interviews with COOs throughout the same period, and additional commentary and insight from Nous Group consultants.

As this annual survey evolves, we look forward to broadening its reach, and exploring the insights over time, as they emerge.

A note on terminology

Terminology for people, roles and institutions varies across the world. For the sake of consistency, we have referred to the institutions as “universities”, but this should be read to include other post-secondary educational institutions as well as the faculties within institutions. We have referred to the operations leader as the Chief Operating Officer, although we are mindful some institutions use other titles. We have referred to “professional services” when referring to the operational arm of universities, which in some jurisdictions is also called administrative services or operations.

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The challenge of rapidly changing a system while it is in operation is often described as “**building the plane while flying it**”. However, as we uncovered, for university COOs the challenge goes further – they are seeking to design the structures of a system while it continues to meet the needs of users. They are, indeed, building the *plan* while flying it.

Introduction

University Chief Operating Officers (COOs) in Australia, Canada, Ireland, New Zealand and the UK are emerging from two years of operational hypervigilance. These two years were a time of financial shocks, staff restructures, accelerated shifts to virtual learning, eerily quiet campuses, and students and staff seeking wellbeing support en masse. This presented immense challenges but also interesting lessons and opportunities.

In this time, universities and their COOs were forced to make faster decisions but then experienced internal barriers to change and agility more acutely than ever before. COOs had the opportunity to rapidly transform their operations on multiple fronts in parallel and, through this, find new ways to partner with - and at times lead - their executive peers. COOs also learnt how to drive performance, but often with less resources.

It is often said that good leaders never waste a good crisis. The emergence from the pandemic offers a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for COOs to make major changes and embed them for the future. As part of university leadership teams, every COO is thinking carefully about the changes that are right for their institution.

To help with this bold thinking, Nous Group surveyed more than 70 university operational leaders from across Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the UK to understand their priorities and their sense of the opportunity ahead. From this, we have distilled priorities, role developments and strategic aspirations that we think will characterise what great university COOs and senior leadership teams will do next.

Our findings are distilled into seven key themes:

The evolving COO. Whereas once the COO was the lead administrator and then later risk manager, now they are required to also play the role of strategic partner to the executive.

Data-led decisions. A trend toward ‘informed decisiveness’ is helping COOs cut through the paradox of choice and exhaustive strategic processes.

Financial fortunes. The speed at which institutions return to financial surplus depends on where those institutions are but there is much COOs can do to establish long-term sustainability.

The digital challenge. The pandemic necessitated rapid digital change and now COOs have an opportunity to use the momentum to push through efficiency and quality gains across the institution.

Tomorrow’s campus, today. While the traditional university campus is having an identity crisis, it is still central to the student and staff experience, which means there are plenty of challenges to work through.

Talent attraction. Competition for strategic and digital skills is driving creative responses and encouraging universities to invest more in their human resources approach.

Market intelligence. Given universities often under invest in the area, there is an edge to be gained by universities that achieve the nexus of market intelligence and student recruitment approaches.

The major area of professional services not covered in this report is student services. We are running a more detailed survey and report on student services trends to explore this critical area in more detail later in 2022.

Operating through a pandemic not only solidified the COO’s critical role in large, complex organisations but also showcased their increasing strategic value. But challenges remain. As one operational leader noted, “*There’s a tension in being the person who controls regulation, stability and good order but also the senior manager driving innovation and transformation.*”



“There’s a tension being the person who controls the regulation, stability, good order but also the senior manager driving innovation and transformation.”



THEME 1

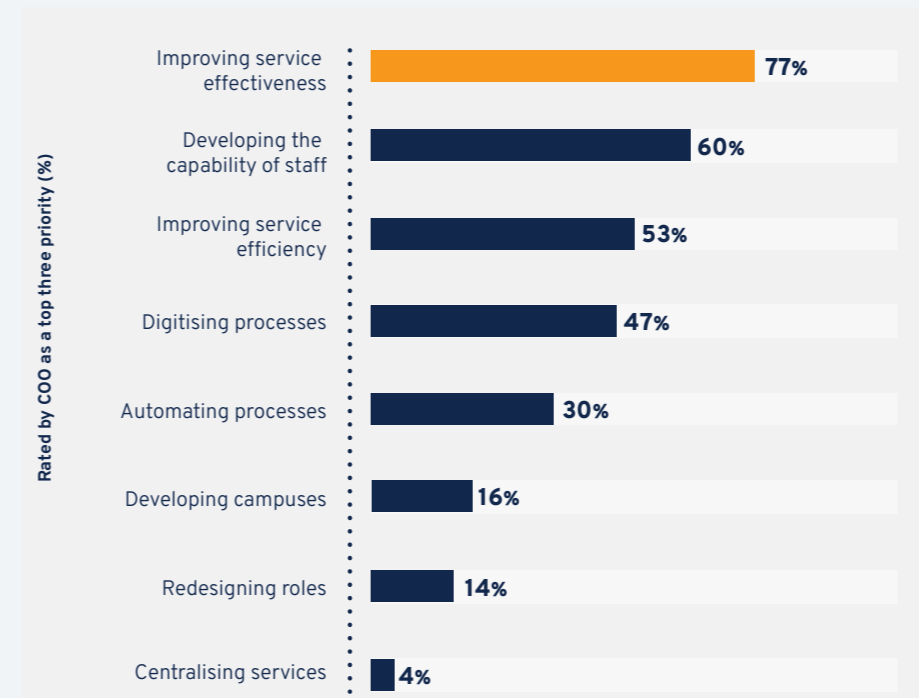
The evolving COO | Administrator to Chief Risk Manager to Strategic Partner

Historically COOs oversaw administration and compliance, then they began to manage enterprise risk. Now, they are also the Strategic Partner to the Executive with a focus on service effectiveness. This represents a two-step change in the COO role where each new state builds on (not replaces) the prior one.

The evolution to service effectiveness

Before the pandemic, COOs were shifting from a focus on regulatory compliance and institutional risk management to a focus on strategic leadership. But the pandemic was a time of extreme stress for university leaders so many COOs focused intensely on operations.

With the broader economy now open, the strategic leadership role of COOs is re-emerging with a clearer focus on service effectiveness. In fact, more than three-in-four COOs in our global survey noted that improving service effectiveness was in their top three priorities.



This focus is not a surprise, as the move to digitally enabled service models has triggered demand for a more service-oriented culture from students, academics and professional staff alike. For students, the introduction and/or increase in student fees, their experience in other industries, and the wider perception of universities as providers and themselves as customers makes them particularly sensitive to service quality. COOs are often responsible for institutional services from HR and IT through to student services and marketing and are, therefore, acutely aware of the impact poor student and/or staff experience has on the institution.

More than three quarters of COOs rank improving service effectiveness as a priority for the coming five years



“We just didn’t have time to breathe over the past two years. If I wasn’t opening the campus, I was closing it down.”

COO of an Australian Go8



Stepping up as institutional change leaders

The challenge noted by COOs is that ineffective services are often caused by dated or poorly designed digital systems and an unwillingness of staff to adopt new systems and process. Universities often say their 'digital deficit' is a contributing factor.

Therefore, COOs recognise people leadership, rather than just service improvement, as the key to unlocking service effectiveness. As one COO noted, *"The higher education sector is more change resistant than other sectors including government."* Pushed further, the compliance role of operational functions can hinder a better user experience for staff and students and is an underlying driver for this change resistance.

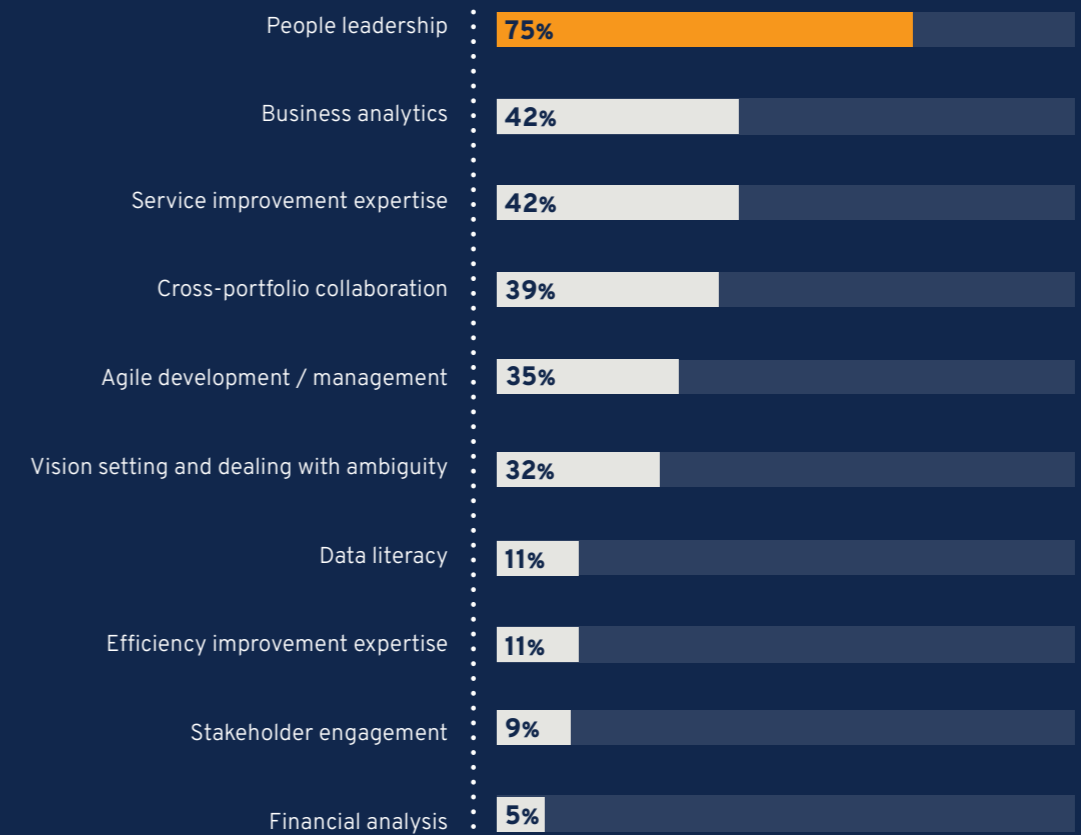
Strategic change management is becoming a crucial string to a COO's bow. Universities must invest to support their people to adapt to new ways of working and COOs are accountable for those changes.



"There's a tension being the person who controls the regulation, stability, good order but also the senior manager driving innovation, transformation."

People leadership was the skill development priority most commonly identified by COOs

Skill development priority in professional services teams (% agree)



THEME 2

Data-led decisions | A new pace and style for COOs

A new pace and style of decision making – ‘informed decisiveness’ – was established during the pandemic. This was enabled by clear and consistent communication of strategic objectives, a willingness to champion change and co-sponsorship with academic leaders. COOs said change management and better use of data analytics are essential to maintaining this new model of decision making.

COVID-19 proved universities can rapidly adapt how they work

Universities' responses to COVID-19 proved the power of coordinated and faster-moving strategy and the ability of COOs to enable significant change. Notwithstanding the hyper-operational focus of many operational functions, COOs' old ways of working simply could not continue. Many universities established a change momentum otherwise thought impossible. For example, over the past two years, universities have rapidly digitised courses, reorganised student support services and channels, implemented many online forms and created self-

service technology platforms.

These rapid responses, delivered through ‘informed decisiveness’, have not always been perfect but have allowed universities to iterate on changes to continuously improve and swiftly transform what they offer. This demonstrates the potential to build momentum for strategic change. It also contrasts with the traditional approach to university strategy: methodically engaging through committee structures to socialise and execute strategy and organisational change over several years.

Communication of strategic objectives was most frequently ranked as an important attribute of university leaders



“We are in a period of political uncertainty, with the outcome unclear but ongoing transformation is non-negotiable. This will require a more agile and adaptable workforce and focus on key drivers and evidence to ensure that change is meeting its objectives.”

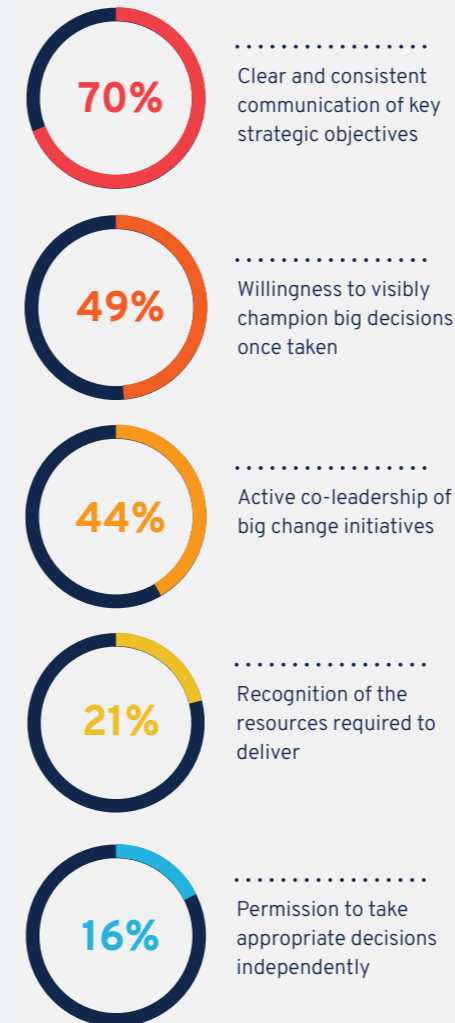
COO of a mid-sized UK university

Leadership and strategic communication enabled staff to maintain pace of change

Our global COO survey found the core ingredients of rapid and successful change are clear and consistent communication of strategic objectives, a willingness to champion change and for co-sponsorship with academic leaders.

The need for quick and difficult choices has brought challenges for some universities, such as staff burnout and leadership losing the trust of their people.

Important leadership attribute in professional services teams (% agree)



IN PRACTICE ¹

A leading New Zealand university and founding member of the UniForum program, successfully navigated the significant restrictions imposed by the New Zealand Government in response to COVID-19. The response was enabled by clear communication, data-informed decision-making using information that had wide support and the ability to rapidly redeploy resources between academic divisions to meet rapidly changing demands. This agility came from their use of common roles across the academic divisions.

People leadership is a persistent priority for professional services, while internal stakeholder engagement will give way to evidence-based decision-making over the next five years.



Data analytics is the next big step

Data analytics is an emerging tool to support the decision making. As a COO of an Australian Group of Eight university put it, “data drives everything”. But data is not currently driving strategic decision making across all universities. From our survey, just one-in-four COOs (25 per cent) said evidence-based decision-making was currently a high priority. However, 42 per cent rate it as a high priority over the coming three to five years.

From Nous' work with universities on large strategic initiatives and operational improvements, universities that have invested in data analytics experienced a step change in their speed and confidence of their with strategic decision making. The challenge for COOs is to establish good data governance and clear data ownership, and to ensure data is shared appropriately across the institution and not held too tightly and with too few people. COOs will also need to develop the skills to use data to support change initiatives throughout implementation.

¹James Catts, *How smart transformation has enabled a flexible and effective response to COVID-19*, UniForum, 24/06/2021, <https://insights.uniforum.co/uniforum-insights/how-smart-transformation-has-enabled-a-flexible-and-effective-response-to-covid-19/>



THEME 3

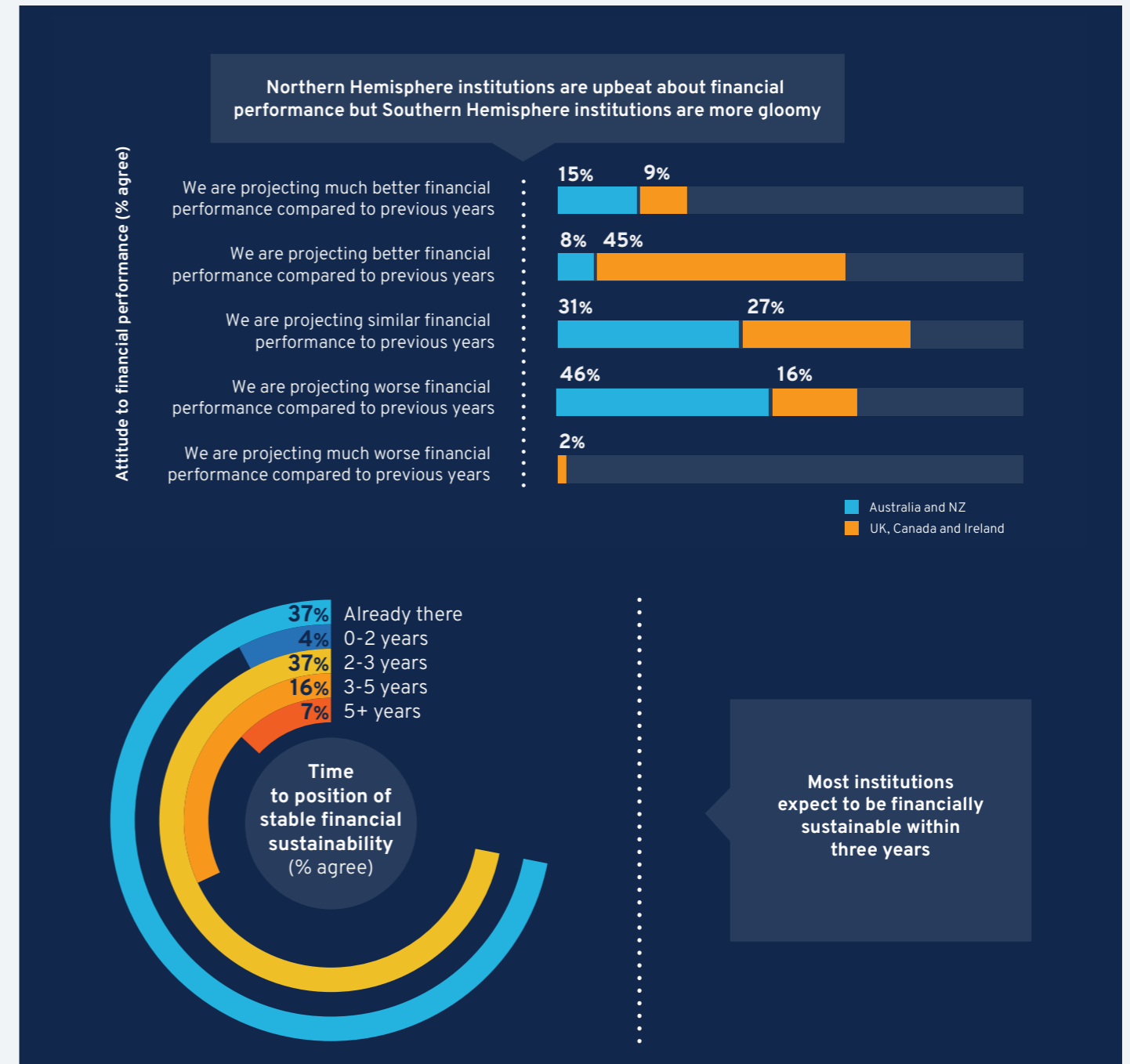
Financial fortunes | Establishing long-term sustainability

COVID-19's timing has led to a geographic bifurcation of the financial fortunes of universities: the Northern Hemisphere expects to rebound quickly while Australia and New Zealand will take longer. Most COOs see a return to financial sustainability within three years. COOs have several levers available to improve financials, but the challenge is to ensure financial restructuring genuinely establishes long-term sustainability.

Universities' current financial health depends on geography

The financial performance of universities is a two-speed story. In the UK, Canada and Ireland, 81 per cent of universities expect similar or better performance compared to the initial pandemic years. In Australia and New Zealand, it is only 54 per cent. This result aligns with the timing of COVID-19 and governments' responses. In the Southern Hemisphere, the pandemic hit just as international students were due to come to campus and the government instituted tighter border controls than almost anywhere in the world.

Importantly, four-out-of-five institutions said they would be in a stable financial position within three years. This speaks to higher education's ability to find solutions to the financial challenges of the past two years.



The levers for financial recovery are diverse

Throughout the pandemic, COOs have pursued a range of strategies to maintain target surpluses. Expanding international student intake, the most popular approach, was cited by two-in-five COOs. As borders open, in-person international study again becomes a reality. But the sector has become more sophisticated in its attraction strategies, so many universities will find it more difficult to fill their places.

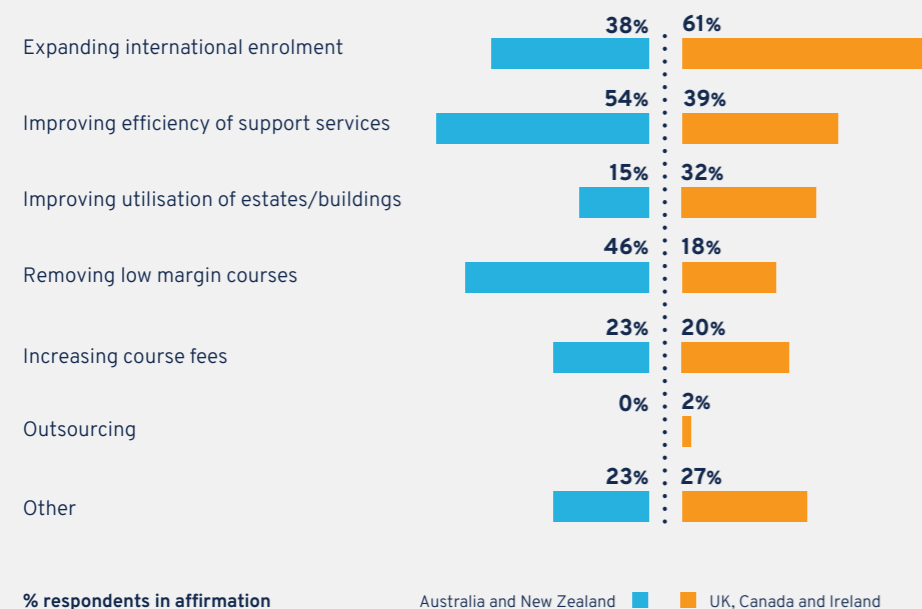
Finding efficiency in professional services was also popular as universities sought to retain their academics. Rationalisation of programmes to increase financial returns is on the radar of some COOs, with complex discussions required with academic leaders and staff to see such efforts through.

It is worth noting the difference in priorities cited by COOs in Australia and New Zealand compared to those in the UK, Canada and Ireland. There is a markedly greater focus from the former on efficiencies and fees, while their colleagues in the Northern Hemisphere looked to international student intake and rethinking how they use their estate.

This is likely due in part to the point in time when the survey was conducted – at a time when Europe and North America had already re-opened their borders, and when Australia and New Zealand still had no firm date for the re-opening of theirs.

In all regions, outsourcing - once considered a quick fix to reduce cost and complexity - is not popular as a path to short-term cost savings. Some COOs found that outsourcing even increased costs (for example, if they outsource catering they must subsidise meals). But outsourcing can:

- Reduce capital expenditure (for example, allow developers to build student accommodation)
- Increase the quality of outcomes (for example, get expert businesses to offer services rather than use thin university resources)
- Reduce risk (for example, use a managed service provider for infrastructure maintenance).



“We are undertaking a careful review of all spend (pay and non-pay) across the institution to make sure we are investing in the most important things to deliver our strategy.”

COO of a Russell Group university in the UK



“How we manage our estate and what we outsource is an opportunity. Universities need to recognise they are not builders or developers – we need to get really good at partnering. The flow of capital coming into the sector is a big opportunity.”

COO of a STEM-focused university in the UK

Expanding international enrolment has been the most common strategy to maintain target surpluses

Sustainment mechanisms hard to implement but essential

COOs will need to monitor the sustainability of cost reduction approaches because some costs are easy to cut initially but create larger, unavoidable costs later. Estates are the most common example – reducing the long-term maintenance budget is simple but often leads to a backlog of long-term maintenance and increased institutional risk.

The higher education sector is familiar with cost fallouts. Even before the pandemic, several universities took cost out only for it to return within a few years. To build back better, universities need to not only lower their cost base strategically but also to implement sustainment mechanisms, including budget model improvements, hiring or position controls, and end-to-end service model redesign.



“We are mindful of a general reduction of expenditure and tight controls, but it can result in damage. For example: impact on long term maintenance costs.”

COO of a Russell Group university in the UK



THEME 4

The digital challenge | The great step change

The pandemic forced a great step change for digital investment in universities to improve IT systems and infrastructure. COOs see process automation beginning to emerge but scaled efficiency gains are yet to be realised. Universities continue to struggle with change management.



“IT must develop and keep pace with new expectations of generations who have grown up with different capabilities.”

Automation is the next significant digital priority

Against a backdrop of the need to modernise service delivery and improve service effectiveness, process digitisation and automation has emerged as a clear priority for many COOs. One respondent COO asked, “If you can do it with mortgage applications, why not admissions?” COOs see automation as not only a mechanism to support the service experience but also to reduce repetitive transactional work and cost.

Universities are at the start of their automation journey. Studies on automation have found process

efficiency gains of 40 per cent to 70 per cent in functions such as HR, finance and admissions. With roughly half of professional services in a university being transactional, the potential is significant.

Automation is necessary to allow professional services to take on more strategic activities. The time saved from manual and transactional work can be converted into analysis, planning and implementation of programmes of change and improvement that improve performance and reduce cost.



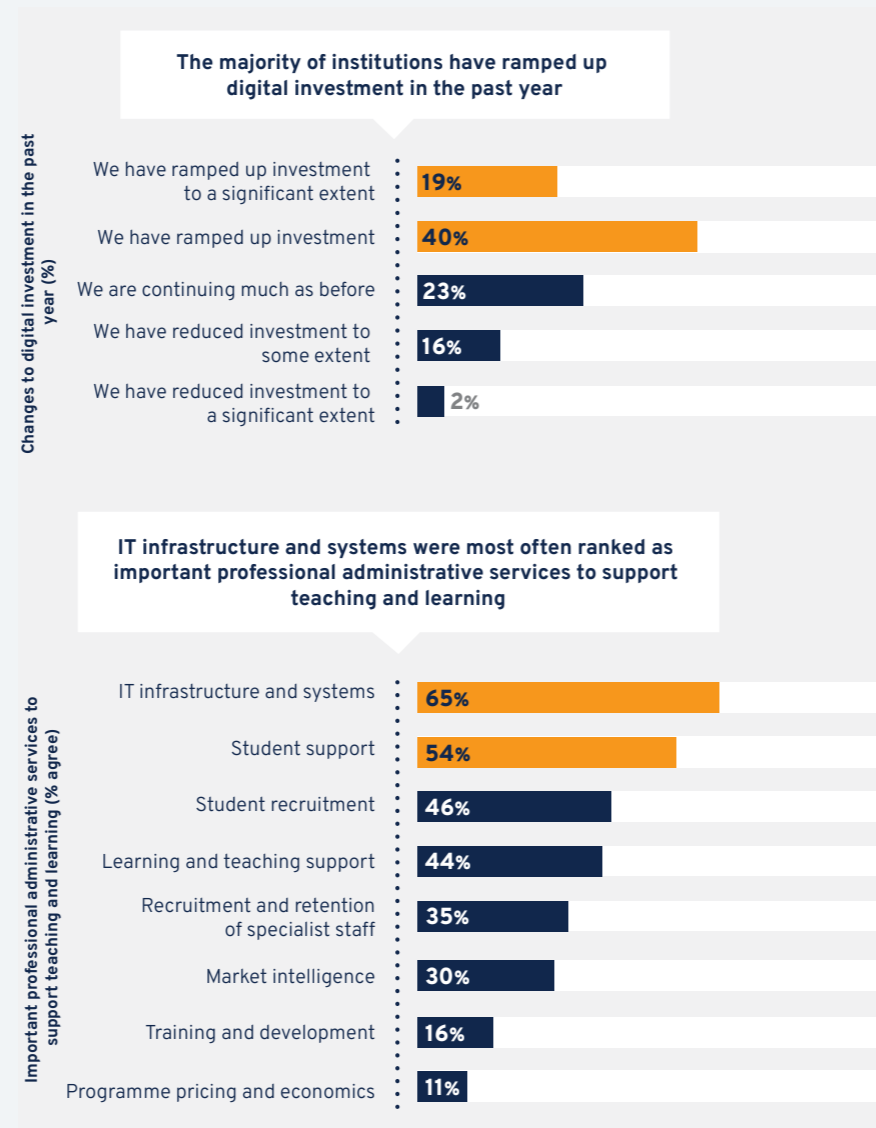
“Digital transformation in student acquisition and service delivery will enhance the financial performance of the university, allowing greater investment in academic activity and improvement in rankings and recognition, thus producing a virtuous cycle of growth.”

COO of an Australian Go8

Digital investment is high and will remain so

Institutions worked intensively during the pandemic to build digital infrastructure that would support student and academic life. Examples range from providing platforms to enable online learning and teaching, to converting paper forms in accounts receivable to automated processes. Survey responses confirmed this, finding most COOs increased digital investment over the past 12 months. The challenge for COOs is to sustain this digital investment and the value provided. As one COO said, “An institution can look very old fashioned very quickly if it does not embrace some of the digital/mobile-first approaches adopted across society.”

Correspondingly, UniForum, a collaborative university benchmarking program delivered by Cubane (a Nous Group company) has been monitoring the ‘As a Service’ spend among its members for the past five years. Unsurprisingly, it has been growing rapidly. What is surprising is that it is not as a substitute for in-house spend on supporting and maintaining in-house IT services and applications. A key plank in the CIO’s strategy needs to be how to turn off legacy systems.



The human side of digital is the Achilles heel

Legacy systems can drain efficiency and preclude universities from mining their data for insight. But universities that attempt system renewal often find it expensive and slow, and too often it fails to deliver the promised improvements. A critical challenge in this is the prevailing resistance to adopting service models that modern workflow systems are built to support, resulting in legacy ways of working and of resourcing services that use only a fraction of the capabilities of the new systems being implemented. To overcome this, the CIO must find ways to work in concert with the COO, other functional leaders and with the academic division leadership.

Additional challenges benefiting from IT investments include poor procurement, lack of project accountability, scope shift, and simply scale and complexity. A Russell Group COO described these IT systems implementations as “simultaneously a project and forever”.

Across all markets – and as with other industries – the major barriers to success often relate to behaviour and culture. The Canadian COOs we spoke to, each of

whom has overseen big IT infrastructure projects, said they struggled to bring university staff along on the ‘change journey’. The prospects for success can be improved by working through job redesign and rethinking core processes rather than building the technology around established practices.

Ultimately, successful digital changes require a complex set of instruments – and people – to work together. For example:

- the implementation approach must properly identify the root problem;
- leaders must procure a cost-effective IT solution that will work alongside the rest of the university’s digital estate; and
- finance must allocate sufficient investment for software configuration and proper people change management.

Plus, after all this, leaders must foster a culture of continuous improvement and adaptation once implementation is complete.

IN PRACTICE

Nous partnered with a UK university to develop a five-year Digital Strategy. The strategy needed a solid digital foundation, given it required a new culture, new ways of working, new digital skills and capabilities for supporting staff and students.

We then worked with the university to develop a detailed implementation plan, which included change management, engagement with staff and students, benefits realisation, and initiative prioritisation. The plan and ongoing work showed the benefit the digital strategy will deliver to the university’s community in order to generate buy-in and deliver sustainable change.



THEME 5

Tomorrow's campus, today | The estate challenge

The traditional university campus is having an identity crisis. Investment is down. Students don't want to go to large lecture theatres. Staff don't want to commute five days a week. Many questions remain but COOs know the post-pandemic campus will not be the same as the pre-pandemic campus.

Campus investment fell during the pandemic

For the same reasons digital investment one-in-five has increased it. During the pandemic, campus (or estate) investment declined. Nearly half of all COOs surveyed have reduced spending on estates and only one-in-five have increased. Universities have also spent less on maintenance during the pandemic, an unsustainable trend.



Investment in building and estates has gently reduced over the past year



Changes to major capital (building/estates) investment in the past year (%)

Campus experience is a core value proposition for students

Nearly four-in-five surveyed COOs said that improving the on-campus experience for students was a major enabler of their institutional strategy. Following reduced investment during the pandemic, COOs are grappling with significant questions about their estate:

- What is the campus' role in providing students with the structures they need to succeed in their studies?
- What is the role of large auditoriums or seminar rooms as well as spaces with technology for blended learning and collaborative research?
- What are the right priorities for capital expenditure?

Aligning campuses and teaching spaces to post-pandemic student expectations will take years to realise. Many universities will implement smart campus solutions to create a seamless digital and physical estate. But more immediate returns may be reaped by more cosmetic changes such as getting the right composition of food and retail on campus, creating more opportunities for community use of campus facilities, and investing in green spaces. These relatively small changes can help create a 'sticky' campus where students spend more time, enabling stronger communities that attract prospective students.

Universities are rethinking the office proposition for staff

The use of space also impacts the university's workforce. Like all organisations, universities are rethinking office space. Employers are responding to two years of isolation with more flexible working, reliance on digital communication and even experimentation with the length of the working week. University staff are reticent to accept going back to how things were pre-pandemic..

Re-opening provides an opportunity for COOs to use their campuses in innovative ways. For example, instituting home-office policies and shared workspaces can free up more space for teaching and reduce pressure on estates. Redesign and upgrade of office space or moving to a four-day work week could be coupled with

culture change initiatives to boost productivity, agility and collaboration. An Australian COO said, "If we claim to be aligned to industry, we need to look more like industry."

New ways of working must tie in with a university's strategy to improve campus experience for students. Academic staff may still be required to spend much of their time on campus for in-person teaching and informal learning opportunities while operational services staff may be more able to work remotely. COOs must think carefully about how flexible options for staff, which improve staff experience and help attract talent, will impact providing a great student experience on the campus of tomorrow.



"A big shift is required to build an engaging on-campus experience for staff and students. This will require new capabilities for staff; new enablers such as different physical and digital spaces; new roles and processes to support student, academics and co-curricular experiences; and support for academic staff to deliver changed value propositions."

COO of New Zealand university

Talent attraction | Fierce competition for strategic and digital skills

Sourcing talent is a growing challenge for COOs and their leadership teams. Competition for strategic and digital skills is fierce, both within the sector and across the economy. While more can be done to recruit and onboard external talent, the greatest untapped source is graduating students from their own organisations.

People with technical skills are hard to recruit

COOs are facing into the headwinds of the global talent shortage. More than half the COOs surveyed (54 per cent) reported only being able to fill priority positions half the time. This is caused by a range of factors, including negative perceptions of higher education as an industry to work within.

Most COOs identified IT experts, data analysts and business analysts as the hardest to find. Similarly, people with strategic skills and agile experience continue to be in high demand.



"We face shortages in all skills and capabilities in our professional staff (current and those we recruit) due to a complete lack of parity of esteem in the HE sector in this region."

COO of an Australian Go8

Sector outsiders encounter barriers when entering higher education

To address talent gaps, COOs are looking outside the higher education sector. Universities can present a compelling value proposition to potential out-of-sector recruits. However, there are barriers to transition effectively into administrative roles.

In some instances, universities oversell a position or underestimate the work required to induct non-sector recruits. This can apply to more than just operational roles. In an anecdote shared by a COO of a large UK university, the job advertisement for the head of a new medical school failed to indicate that 65 per cent of the role was effectively fundraising, leading to a mismatch between the recruit's expectations and skillset and the position's actual responsibilities.

The out-of-sector recruitment challenges will persist, but universities can do more to make themselves attractive and effective at onboarding talent. This starts with modernising human resource departments, many of which continue to be highly transactional. Other changes include:

- Streamline recruitment process to reduce delays and candidate leakage, given long recruitment times have caused some universities to repeatedly lose strong candidates
- Invest in induction and onboarding processes to include pre-boarding support, buddy systems and coordinated joint planning
- Ensure that roles are designed with clear career pathways within the university, so the path to career progression is evident
- Modernise workplace spaces to create a more collaborative and less hierarchical office culture.

IN PRACTICE

One UniForum member found they had created highly fragmented roles. Without clear career development pathways, there was little investment in training and no natural communities of practice. To address this, the university instigated a wholesale role redesign process to create common roles with well-defined career development pathways. As a result, communities of practice formed around common interests and staff retention increased.



"People coming from within the sector don't seem to have a 'commercial' understanding of how to run an institution. However, those who come from outside struggle to understand the lie of the land within the sector, which can lead to frustration."

COO of a UK university

Universities must upgrade their capability and embrace creative solutions to talent development

Competition with other sectors means finding and developing talent is crucial to filling skill gaps. COOs identified both difficult and creative options to find and nurture talent:

- **The difficult.** Investing more in the talent attraction and retention capabilities in human resources teams and addressing performance management will help universities make more of their professional services people. This investment will also help to develop and retain future managers and senior leaders. An underlying challenge, as noted in the example overleaf, is the transactional nature of many human resources activities in universities. Creating HR service delivery models that more clearly distinguish between the transactional HR activities (e.g., recruiting process support) versus the strategic HR activities (e.g., providing staffing advice) is key.
- **The creative.** Graduating students from the institution are a largely untapped source of future professional services talent, as most universities are yet to implement graduate recruitment programmes of the scale and sophistication of similar sized organisations in analogous industries (such as Government or Professional Services). With universities having unparalleled access to students there are countless opportunities to creatively identify and recruit undergraduate and postgraduate students into the university workforce.





THEME 7

Market intelligence | Proving its worth

Competition for students will reach new levels as universities seek to repair budgets. Market intelligence, particularly when integrated into the student recruitment process, has the potential to provide competitive advantage for universities. This requires a high level of collaboration and trust between marketing, academics and other functional units across the institution.

Better market intelligence is an emerging focus area

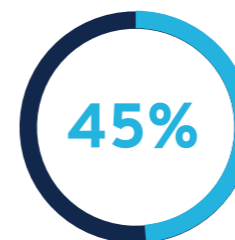
More than 50 per cent of the COOs surveyed noted that international student recruitment and course pricing were the key drivers for generating historical target surpluses in their institutions. With COVID-19 hitting the system hard, COOs also know that competition for students will reach new levels as universities seek to repair budgets. This is particularly the case in Australia, where COOs ranked market intelligence as the third most important administrative service for evolving their teaching and learning approach (45 per cent), compared to the rest of the countries surveyed, where COOs ranked it the sixth highest priority (26 per cent).

Driving competitive advantage in student recruitment

Nous has found that the appetite for market intelligence is particularly strong when universities have either struggled with domestic student recruitment or are focused on their international strategies. In the case of international student recruitment, universities are often reliant on historical market information about major country markets like China, India and South-East Asia. Where real-time market intelligence is collected, such as from in-country agents, it is not necessarily shared across the relevant university decision makers as well as it might be.

Sophisticated market intelligence on target prospective students and major country markets will help universities invest more intelligently in recruitment to attract the desired quality and quantity of students. As a result, the ability to integrate the market effort with the student acquisition process will become even more critical. This will require close collaboration between the CIO, CMO, COO and academic leaders to not only generate real-time market intelligence but also to create digital assets that enhance the student's experience as they respond to the marketing effort and start to

investigate the universities that they are most interested in. Innovators in this space are already creating ways to significantly speed up the application process and give students confidence in what recognised prior learning they will receive. They are also creating novel ways using social media to maintain engagement with students as they consider their university options.



MARKET INTELLIGENCE

Nearly half of all COOs in Australia and New Zealand ranked market intelligence as an important administrative service for evolving their teaching and learning approach.

Concluding remarks

COOs and their functional areas of responsibility are an engine room for a university. As they build on their historical roles of compliance and risk and move more into that of a strategic partner, COOs are indeed building the plan whilst flying it.

Working closely with COOs and their management teams, Nous is acutely aware of the tenor and mission-driven nature of universities and the academics and professional staff that lead them. This both influences how we work with universities and what advice we provide to ensure changes are implemented. From our global experience, we find that the critical success factors in our work are strong and clear project sponsorship, carefully crafted stakeholder engagement, depth of sector knowledge and sharp analytical analysis and insights.

Additionally, the collaborative UniForum program, delivered by Cubane (a Nous Group company), has seen member universities and their leaders actively using insights from benchmarking data, along with unique access to best practice from peers, to tackle head-on many of the challenges described in this report, and achieve truly transformational change. For example:

- Taking a whole institution view of capacity available for every service, providing the foundation for truly end-to-end delivery and outcomes
- Ensuring that maximum capacity is available for specialist strategic activities, whether in HR, Finance, Student Services or Research Support, by maximising efficiencies elsewhere, including through automation and role redesign
- Designing and delivering new operating models that emphasise cross-functional collaboration and user-centred delivery, whether in the form of shared service hubs, new management arrangements or communities of practice.

As the decade evolves and higher education institutions progress, it will be essential for COOs and their functional leaders to build on their strategic partner role with the university. Considering this, COOs should be planning and budgeting for the design and implementation of:

- Administration and professional service operating models that drive the interests of the whole university
- Talent management plans driven by new specialist roles and address at a more fundamental level issues with equity, diversity and inclusion
- Digital agendas that result in a single source of truth for student information, highly automated, end-to-end transactional administrative and professional services, and significantly more intuitive service interfaces
- Onmichannel service hubs for staff and students with curated triage and a service culture ethos
- Designing and implementing integrated planning and budget processes that drive intended behaviours aligned to the strategic objectives of the whole institution
- New master plans for campuses that better respond to the changes in staff and student preferences post COVID-19
- Fully integrated marketing, recruitment and admission processes, to enable more effective competition for high quality students in key markets.

We are proud to already be strategic advisors to many of the COOs that were engaged in this research, and we are often asked to support them in addressing the significant questions and challenges highlighted in the report.



“It is clear to us that while the role of the COO has only recently evolved to include that of a strategic partner, by the end of the decade it will be more fully realised provided COOs can action these significant and strategic organisational changes.”

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Nous Group is an international management consultancy with over 500 people working across Australia, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, Ireland and Canada. With our broad consulting capability, we can solve your most complex strategic challenges and partner with you through transformational change.

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