From promise to pragmatism: Delivering a better student experience

Results from Nous Group's inaugural student experience study

nous

ABOUT THIS REPORT

This report is based on a Nous Group study exploring different approaches to improving student experience at universities. It also looks at contemporary students' expectations of higher education and how confident institutions are in meeting them.

The study involved:

- preliminary discussions with university student experience leaders, including executives and directors responsible for student experience and success, in order to focus the survey and study

- a survey of more than 180 student experience leaders at universities across Australia, Canada and the United Kingdom (UK)[1]

- workshops and roundtables with staff and students to test and validate findings

- in-depth interviews with leaders to further explore the emerging themes

- Nous' experience working with universities across Australia, Canada and the UK and research into leading global practice.

Measuring student experience

The study focused on the systems that enable student experiences rather than the actual experiences.

A significant amount of research on what students want – and their experiences at university – has already been done.

Rather than repeat this work, we concentrated on perspectives of student experience leaders at universities, only then undertaking small workshops to test whether these aligned with students' perspectives. We also drew on previous research related directly to students where relevant.

A note on terminology

The understanding of what 'student experience' means varies across the world and even within institutions. When we discuss student experience in this report, we are referring to the various touchpoints between an individual and a higher education institution that combine to create an overall impression of what being a student is actually like. These touchpoints include the learning experience, student administrative support services and student life. They occur from pre-enrolment through to graduation and beyond.

In this report, we use the term 'co-design' to describe student engagement in the design of policy, products, services and organisational change at higher education institutions. As an approach, it draws on students' lived experiences and treats students as equals in the design process.

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Introduction

University students' expectations have significantly transformed in recent years.

Student expectations about the experiences universities can and should provide – and how they should be delivered – have changed. This shift was made more visible by the COVID-19 pandemic but was in train well before then.

Student expectations relate not just to on-campus social activities and general wellbeing but also to what students learn, how they are supported to undertake that learning, and how they apply that learning outside university in day-to-day life and the world of work. Student experience relates to the academic experience, administration services, support services and the level of engagement and connection the student has with the institution. It also includes on-campus and online experiences.

To meet these expectations in an increasingly competitive market, many universities have sought to understand how they can deliver not just a 'good' experience but an 'outstanding' one. A university's competitive edge will come through creating and curating a leading experience for all students.

We heard through our study that many university leaders in student experience believed the effectiveness of their institution's current support services in delivering an outstanding experience was good, very good or excellent. While larger institutions were not as confident in their overall experience, they were confident when it came to the traditional undergraduate cohort.

Interestingly, how university leaders rate the services does not always align with the experience they provide to students and how students rate their experience and these services. In the recent Connected Student Report from Salesforce only a third of students reported having a 'great university experience'.[2]

In Canada, a survey of first years found that just over half had their overall expectations 'met' but not 'exceeded'.[3] In Australia and the UK, while around three quarters of students report being 'satisfied' or giving a 'positive' rating, these ratings are still below pre-pandemic levels.[4]

In this environment, we sought to understand what steps a university can take to achieve an outstanding student experience. To find practical answers, our study asked:

What initiatives have universities designed and implemented to create an outstanding experience for students?

We have distilled the results of this study into seven observations around which we have structured our report.

OBSERVATION 1

Start with understanding

Better student experience delivery starts with a deeper, cohort-sensitive understanding gained through data analytics and student partnerships.

OBSERVATION 2

Approach the experience holistically

Student experience must be designed to be more than the sum of multiple (but often disparate) parts. Measuring the whole experience is tough, but vital.

OBSERVATION 3

Technology is a cornerstone

Self-service and process automation are freeing up staff to solve more complex and /or sensitive student issues.

OBSERVATION 4

Services must be right time, right place

Universities must better understand how their services can be tailored to different student groups at different times.

OBSERVATION 5

Make astute use of third parties

Specialist third parties providers are integral to the student experience.

OBSERVATION 6

Centralised delivery is effective

The most effective and cohesive student service operating models are centralised.

OBSERVATION 7

Capability and culture matter

A culture of student success is replacing the historical compliance culture. Leadership involvement and accountability are key to driving this culture.

FIGURE 1

Rate the effectiveness of your institution's current student support services in delivering an outstanding student experience, by institution size

	Fair	Good	Very good	Excellent
Large	13%	40%	40%	7%
Medium	3%	13%	53%	30%
Small		11%	67%	22%
Very small	3%	10%	40%	57%

Legend: Fair, Good, Very good, Excellent

Start with understanding

Historically, many universities took a one-size-fits-all approach to student experience. However, our study found unequivocally that universities realise this no longer works. They recognise that the student group is becoming more diverse, and that expectations are shifting accordingly.

As a result, it is increasingly vital for universities to understand who contemporary university students are and what matters to them. Only then can institutions make the improvements necessary to create outstanding experiences for all.

Today's students are changing

The volume of students attending university is increasing, and they bring with them a greater diversity of backgrounds.[5] Many universities have more students learning part time or online, more students from non-English speaking backgrounds and more mature age students than ever before.

In Australia, for example, from 2008 to 2020, there was a:

- **43 per cent**
  increase in students from rural and remote areas

- **63 per cent**
  increase in students from low socio-economic status backgrounds

- **135 per cent**
  increase in the number of Indigenous Australian undergraduate students

- **169 per cent**
  increase in students with a disability.

International student enrolments grew by 50 per cent over the same period (noting a decline in 2020 with the COVID-19 pandemic).[6]

Modality preferences are also changing. This significant shift to online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in students having increased preferences (and changes to previous preferences) about whether they study online, blended or face-to-face.[7]

Many student experience leaders involved in the study, however, noted that student experience initiatives are typically designed to focus on the experience of undergraduate and school-leaver cohorts rather than other groups. This is reflected in the feedback we received from student experience leaders from larger universities who were more confident they can and do provide an outstanding undergraduate experience (see Figure 3). For example, orientation activities are typically designed for on-campus participation, are usually scheduled for the first week of the first semester and aimed at students in their first year.

There has been a shift from elite to mass education. With increasing number of students comes greater diversity.

Director of student experience, Australian university

Our model has been designed to support more 'traditional' students.

Staff workshop participant, UK university

Survey respondents at many universities – and especially large universities – do not believe their student experience model caters well for students from diverse backgrounds, including first-in-family, culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD), and Indigenous students (see Figure 2). Similarly, the needs of students undertaking postgraduate coursework and research were thought to be overlooked (see Figure 3). Most believe also that the needs of online students are not always properly considered (see Figure 4).

When we explored this further in roundtables and interviews, student experience leaders highlighted that smaller institutions have a better opportunity to understand their student cohort. By their very nature they cater for smaller numbers of students and can therefore spend more time creating more personalised experiences.

Targeted support for international students

The University of Toronto (Canada) established a Centre for International Experience to support its international students.

Its website has advice on many different topics for international students, from academic supports through to practical information on arriving and living in Toronto.[8]

Diversity and inclusion initiatives

The London Metropolitan University (UK) established a Centre for Equity and Inclusion to help eliminate racial and religious bias on campus. The centre hosts a dashboard where staff can track the university's progress in implementing recommendations from Race in the Workplace, known as the McGregor-Smith Review.

Staff can also access the university's education for social justice framework, statistics on diversity and recruitment targets, and inclusive behaviours training modules.[9]

FIGURE 2

How well does the current model in support an outstanding student experience for the following student groups?

eg, first-in-family, LGBTQI, CALD, Indigenous, international, people with disability

60% Somewhat

20% Well

20% Very well

FIGURE 3

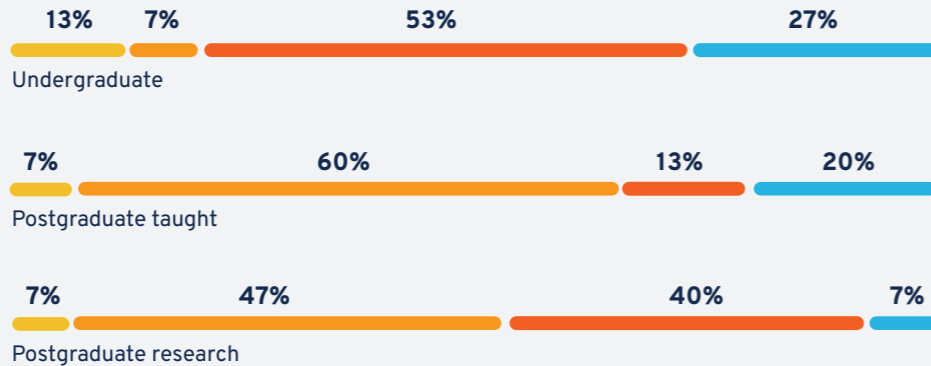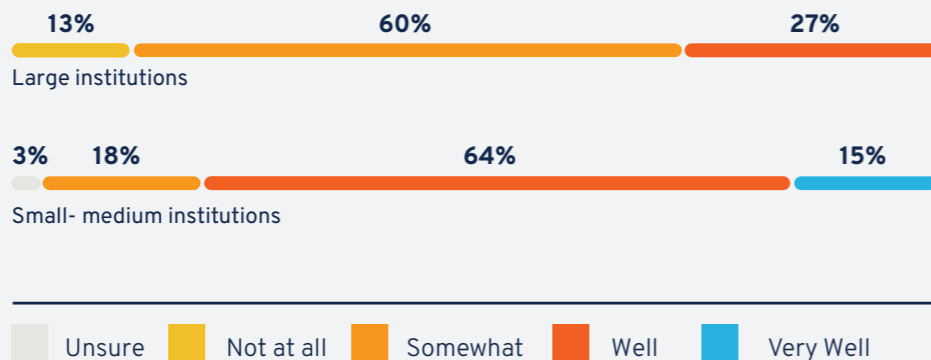How well does your current model support an outstanding student experience for the following groups?

Undergraduate: 13% | 7% | 53% | 27%

Postgraduate taught: 7% | 60% | 13% | 20%

Postgraduate research: 7% | 47% | 40% | 7%

FIGURE 4

How well does the current model support an outstanding student experience for online students?

Large institutions: 13% | 60% | 27%

Small- medium institutions: 3% | 18% | 64% | 15%

Unsure | Not at all | Somewhat | Well | Very Well

Universities are getting better at understanding students

To better appreciate the diversity of their student cohorts, universities are implementing new approaches that involve understanding the key moments that matter to students. These moments that matter include, for example:

- **enrolment:** being able to easily enrol and understand mandatory versus optional units of study

- **preparation and arrival:** postgraduate research students being provided with early and tailored information on administrative and academics processes

- **navigation:** being able to easily navigate both the physical and digital campus.

To genuinely understand their students, universities must go beyond demographics. They also need to consider psychographic factors such as individual learning needs, students' different motivations for studying and perspectives on broader items such as risk/reward and social connectivity.

Universities can use this information to segment student populations and tailor student experience initiatives to specific groups. They can also manage the expectations of students by clearly communicating from the start what they can and cannot deliver.

> We are trying to honour diversity and uniqueness, students don't want to be lumped into groups
>
> **Student Services leader, Canadian university**

> We should understand not just demographics but the psychographics of our students – what their motivations and expectations are.
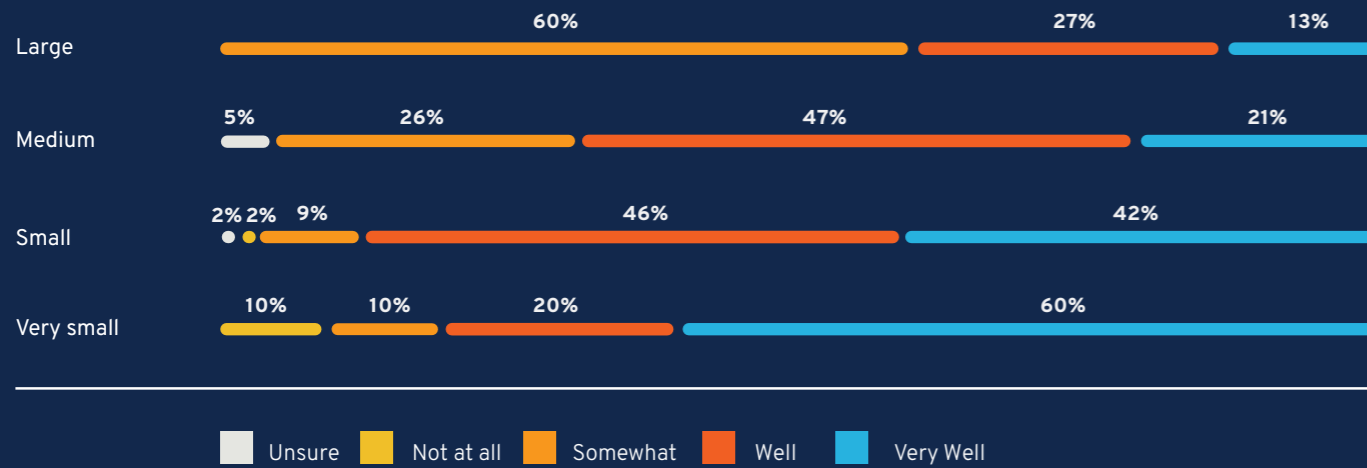>
> **Student experience leader, Australian university**

DATA ANALYTICS

Many university student experience leaders involved in the study highlighted the power of data analytics to provide institutions with increasingly sophisticated insights into students. In fact, many student experience leaders say their institutions believe that they use student analytics 'well' or 'very well' to inform the design of initiatives (see Figure 5). This is particularly the case for very small and small institutions.

Large		60%		27%	13%
Medium	5%	26%	47%		21%
Small	2% 2% 9%		46%		42%
Very small	10%	10%	20%	60%	

Legend: Unsure · Not at all · Somewhat · Well · Very Well

Study participants provided information on the ways student attitudinal data is and could be collected, including online (through polls) and in surveys conducted in the classroom or other spaces on campus. Data was then used to generate insights, ranging from how students felt about the big things (such as the ease of their enrolment experience) to the small things (such as the introduction of healthy snacks at cafes on campus).

Student experience leaders said that when higher-quality data is collected, universities can:

- better understand students and their individual needs
- design and deliver much more targeted support
- track student behaviour to understand whether students are actually more satisfied with their experiences if universities deliver what the students say they want
- make data-informed decisions.

They also highlighted that insights from student data must be integrated, either in a single system or by better integrating disparate systems, to understand student cohorts more holistically.

Throughout our student experience leaders stated the importance of ethical and privacy-informed data collection. They observed that in best-practice data collection, students are engaged in a conversation about why data is being collected, how it will be used, and the benefits they can expect.

EXAMPLES OF GOOD PRACTICE

An adaptive learning degree

Arizona State University (ASU, United States) launched the world's first adaptive learning degree, which adjusts in real time to meet students' learning needs. ASU collects data on student progress and recommends lesson content tailored to each student. This personal course navigation creates a more effective and efficient learning experience and students learn more dynamically.[10]

Data analytics for student and staff success

At the University of Central Florida (UCF, United States), administration staff are working with Microsoft to use predictive data analytics to understand trends in student and faculty success, university research and alumni donations. Using data dashboards, UCF is drawing on data collected in real time to inform decisions, such as providing help for students displaying patterns that show they are struggling academically.[11]

STUDENTS AS PARTNERS

Student experience leaders emphasised that treating students as genuine partners is critical. If students' views and behaviours are used to inform learning, social, wellbeing and other positive outcomes at university it can be a catalyst for wider institutional change.[12]

For some leaders, working with students to co-design university offerings has been an important step forward – helping them deliver more of what students desire from their higher education experience at crucial times (see Figure 6).

While many survey respondents noted that students are 'involved' or 'actively involved' in the design and delivery of initiatives, few universities regularly partner with students (see Figure 7).

Many student experience leaders said they want to mature their approach and are considering co-design or partnerships to improve student experience, but they recognise they are often using consultation or engagement rather than co-design (see Figure 8).

FIGURE 6

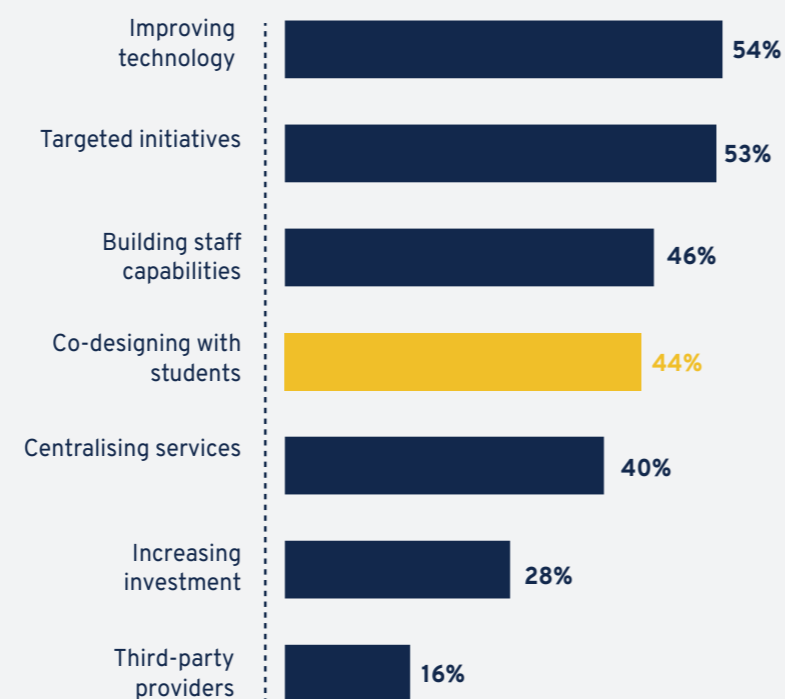What approaches have been most effective in improving student experience?

Approach	%
Improving technology	54%
Targeted initiatives	53%
Building staff capabilities	46%
Co-designing with students	44%
Centralising services	40%
Increasing investment	28%
Third-party providers	16%

FIGURE 7

How involved are students in the design and delivery of an outstanding student experience?

Level	Description	%
Actively involved consultation	Regular two-way consultation / collaboration	54%
Involved	Regular input	29%
Minimally involved	Adhoc	11%
Partnering	Co-design and deliver initiatives	5%
Unsure		1%
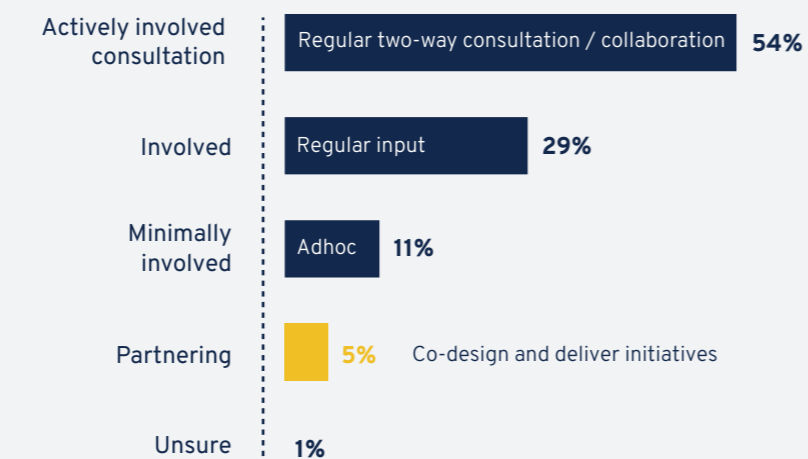
FIGURE 8

Student engagement maturity model

(Nested circles: INFORMED, CONSULTED, ENGAGED, CO-DESIGNED)

INFORMED

Students are **informed** of changes, but not invited to participate in the development of initiatives or decision making process. Students are treated as a homogenous group with little to no differentiation between the type or means of engagement with different cohorts.

CONSULTED

Students are **consulted** during the process to review initiatives/policies but have limited input on pre-determined ideas. They are still not directly involved in development or decision making. Limited, targeted engagement with large student groups, such as student unions, gain general input from students as a whole.

ENGAGED

Students are actively **engaged** during the review, design and decision-making processes. They take part in discussions and contribute ideas, but the decision-making power still lies with the university. Input is invited from a wider cohort of students, representing different cohorts, programs and courses, as well as marginalised groups.

CO-DESIGNED

Students are treated as partners in **co-designing** services and solutions. Student participation is embedded throughout the review and design processes, and decision making is collaborative. A wide cohort of students is actively engaged. Efforts are made to engage those hardest to reach, such as by compensating them for their time.

To move towards a partnership approach, participants in our study said universities need to:

- make more resources available, including staff time and compensation for students' involvement
- ensure staff members have the required skills and capabilities
- be comfortable empowering staff members and students to design change
- be less risk-averse in testing and iterating approaches based on feedback.

EXAMPLES OF GOOD PRACTICE

Students partnering to design services

A program by Curtin University (Australia) brings students and staff together to work as partners in learning, research and university decision-making in order to drive change. The program produces a yearly report card on progress against the report card.[13]

ChangeMakers program to fund action

The University College London (UK) has set up its ChangeMakers program, through which funding is provided for projects and supports for collaborative innovative action to improve student experiences. Staff and students work together on these projects to enhance the learning experience of students at UCL.[14]

Approach the experience holistically

Study participants said the student experience needed to be understood holistically. Many student experience leaders noted that students don't see academic experience as separate from student support services or student life – they see all three elements as part of the one package. Measuring this end-to-end experience, while difficult, is critical to ensuring universities get the most from the investment being made.

During the study, we explored priorities for student academic services, mental health and wellbeing support services, and student administration. We wanted to understand where universities are prioritising their efforts and how focus areas can connect.

❝

Delivering an outstanding student experience is a whole-of-institution activity.

Head of Academic and Student Engagement, Australian university

The learning experience is a cornerstone

Many study participants said a student's sense of belonging and connection with their university is often formed through connection with their academic school or faculty (such as thinking of themselves as an 'engineering' student). A recent UK study found that 'approachable and accessible academic staff ranked foremost in students' perception of their own belonging.'[15]

Respondents to our study said students are most visible to academics, and academics are often the first people students turn to for support. So it is academics who are most likely to realise that students may be experiencing educational, health and wellbeing, or other issues.

Universities appreciate the importance of an institutional approach to student experience and that academic and professional staff must work together in delivery. Creating an outstanding student experience is not solely the responsibility of central professional staff. Student experience leaders said there needs to be greater efforts to engage academics.

When asked how institutions support students academically, around one in three respondents prioritised 'teaching and learning' as the single most important element (see Figure 9).

The results also show around one in five respondents value 'peer support and tutoring' when it comes to delivering academic experiences. It was also selected by many survey respondents as a key area for investment over the next five years – with these respondents highlighting that peer support and tutoring is an effective way for students to engage meaningfully.

❝

[Academics] have the greatest impact – positive or negative.

Student experience leader, Canadian university

FIGURE 9

Which of these student academic support services is the most important for an institution to deliver an outstanding experience? Responses as per-centage from jurisdiction

	Australia	Canada	United Kingdom
Teaching and learning	44%	42%	31%
Peer support and tutoring	15%	19%	23%
Academic skills	7%	14%	23%
Career services	17%	17%	10%
Assessment and feedback	15%	6%	8%
Course administration	2%	3%	4%
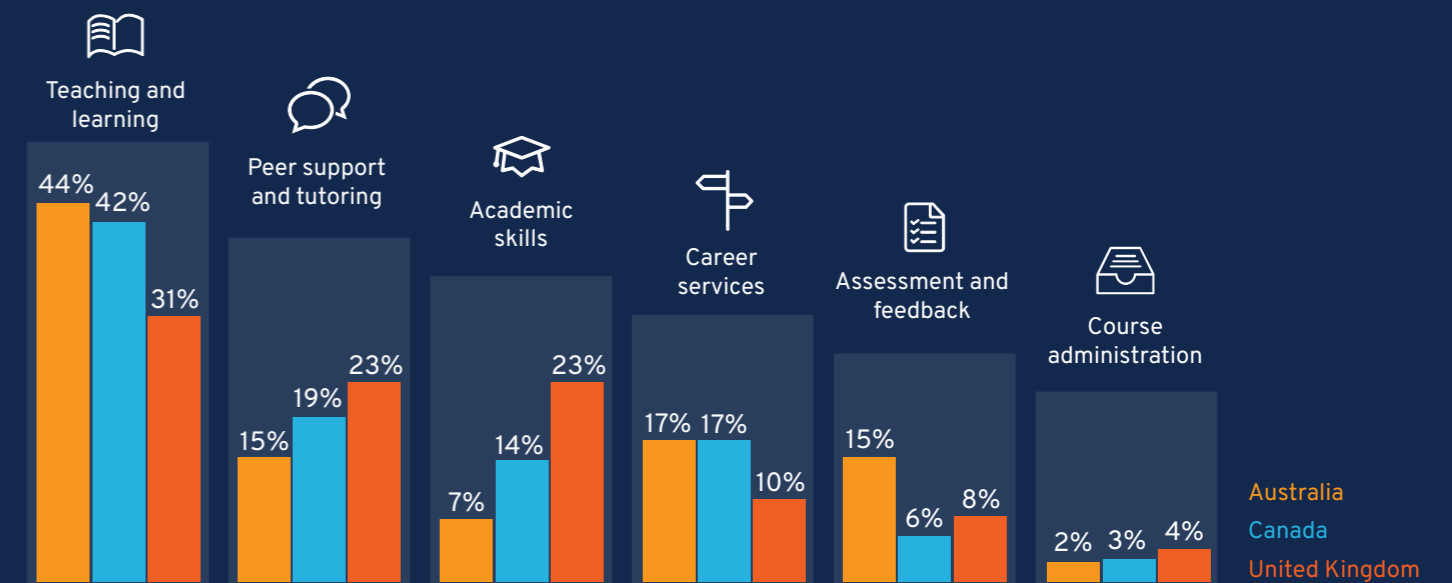
Where leaders prioritised other academic support, such as 'career services' or 'assessment and feedback', they said these enhanced students' overall academic experience at university. Only one in five survey respondents said 'career services' will require the most financial investment among student academic support over the next five years. And yet, in later workshops students said career support was important to them.

Student experience leaders also said building work-integrated learning and employability into the curriculum was increasingly important to universities and students. As part of this, these leaders highlighted that students want to see a clear pathway into jobs and how their programs will prepare them to succeed in these roles.

We have observed from our work that the less practical course and degree qualifications struggle to link their teaching and learning to the world of work. A guiding example of how universities can address this is from Queens University in Canada where undergraduate, on campus, Arts students can enroll in an online Law graduate certificate.[16] Two units of this certificate are included as credits in the Arts degree, and two units are in addition. The Arts student receives a Bachelor of Arts and a graduate Certificate in Law upon completion. Importantly, the law qualification greatly enhances their employment prospects with the Ontario government.

"

Teaching and learning is at the core, and the quality of this has a direct impact on student experience (and success). Vital to this will be incorporating employability into teaching and learning activities.

Director of international, Australian university

Wellbeing is a student priority

Across our study, student experience leaders noted a significant rise in student mental health and wellbeing needs. As a result, universities involved in the study are considering how to broaden the wellbeing support services they offer students to prevent significant issues from occurring.

The importance of addressing mental health issues is evident in research. In Canada one recent study highlighted significant increases in anxiety and depression in students.[17] Of students in Australia and the UK who are considering deferring their studies, mental and emotional health is listed as the most common reason.[18]

Salesforce's latest *Connected Student Report* notes that 'students no longer see their university as solely a place of knowledge but rather they see higher education institutions as holistic support systems'. The report noted over a third of students wanted more wellbeing resources.[19]

Student experience leaders involved in our study said demand for mental health services was related to changed expectations among students, staff members, parents and politicians about what a university should provide. Many universities found it tough to get the right balance between self-help and aided services. In addition to better use of data to provide targeted and proactive interventions, student experience leaders said it was vital that students are informed about what support is available and how to access it.

Survey respondents said mental health and wellbeing would continue to be a focus of investment over the next five years. Some viewed this investment as not just about addressing growing mental health challenges but also as a way to enhance students' overall wellbeing and sense of belonging.

STUDENT WELLBEING AND BELONGING

The COVID-19 pandemic has pushed 'belonging' to the forefront of universities agendas. This has a strong connection with mental health and wellbeing.

In the UK, for example, the Office of National Statistics reported 22 per cent of students felt lonely often or always, compared to 6 per cent of the national population.[20] A 2021 survey of, - 5000 students by Pearson and Wonkhe in the UK found that 69 per cent agreed or strongly agreed that they felt they belong, while only 9 per cent disagreed or strongly disagreed.[21]

The survey also found a sense of belonging was determined by mental health (including loneliness), academic confidence ("imposter syndrome"), inclusion (such as diversity on courses staff and students), feeling connected, developing friendships with peers, and local community.

Student experience leaders told us the focus on belonging can be in tension with the individuality and flexibility that comes with online learning. This is raising a question for universities on how to extend and build belonging for online and hybrid students.

"

Post-COVID, student health and wellbeing has become an even bigger issue than it was before. Students are presenting with more complex issues. More investment needs to be made in preventative measures.

Student experience leader, Australian university

In considering how to address these challenges, universities are looking at the intersection of mental health and wellbeing with other issues, such as financial pressure and housing.[22] Survey respondents noted a need for financial assistance, international student services, and housing (see Figure 10).

Student experience leaders said that without financial support it is impossible for many students to engage with (and in some cases attend) university.
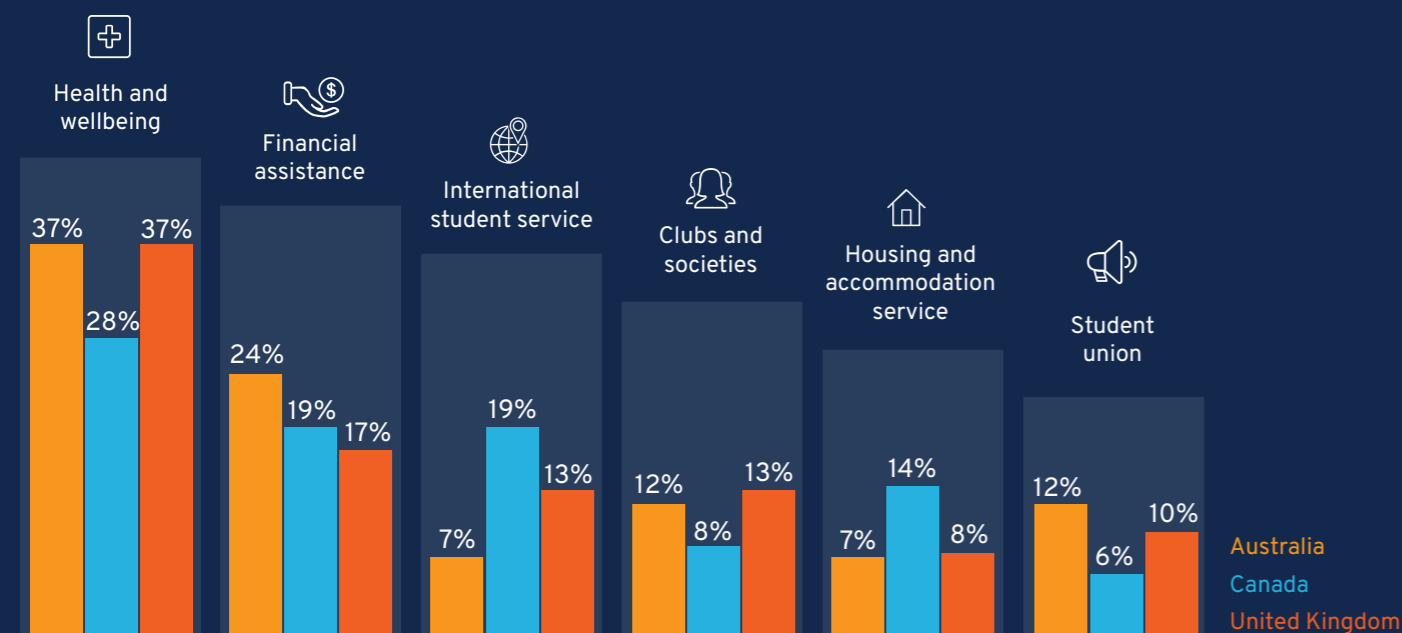
> Financial insecurity of students is at an all-time high, and we will need to find ways to support students through bursaries and scholarships.
>
> **Student experience leader, Canadian university**

FIGURE 10

Which of these student administration services is the most important for an institution to deliver an outstanding experience?
Responses shown as a percentage by jurisdiction

Health and wellbeing — Australia 37%, Canada 28%, United Kingdom 37%
Financial assistance — Australia 24%, Canada 19%, United Kingdom 17%
International student service — Australia 7%, Canada 19%, United Kingdom 13%
Clubs and societies — Australia 12%, Canada 8%, United Kingdom 13%
Housing and accommodation service — Australia 7%, Canada 14%, United Kingdom 8%
Student union — Australia 12%, Canada 6%, United Kingdom 10%

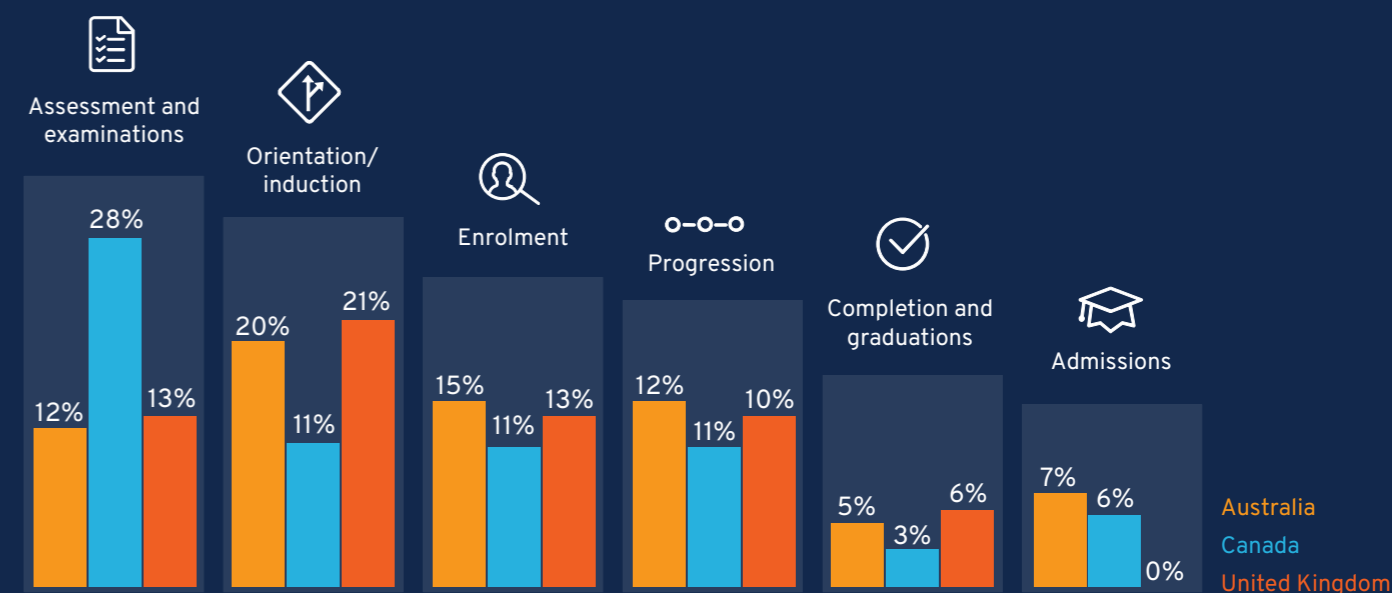Australia
Canada
United Kingdom

Student administration priorities differ

Our survey revealed differences between institutions on priorities for student administration in relation to student experience. While assessment and examinations were seen as particularly important for survey participants in Canada, in Australia and the UK there was a greater focus on orientation and induction (see Figure 11).

FIGURE 11

Which of these student administration services is the most important for an institution to deliver an outstanding experience?
Responses shown as a percentage by jurisdiction

Assessment and examinations — Australia 12%, Canada 28%, United Kingdom 13%
Orientation/induction — Australia 20%, Canada 11%, United Kingdom 21%
Enrolment — Australia 15%, Canada 11%, United Kingdom 13%
Progression — Australia 12%, Canada 11%, United Kingdom 10%
Completion and graduations — Australia 5%, Canada 3%, United Kingdom 6%
Admissions — Australia 7%, Canada 6%, United Kingdom 0%

Australia
Canada
United Kingdom

For study participants in Canada, some said assessment had the greatest impact on a student's experience. At the institutional level, it demonstrates a quality assurance process that allows students and external stakeholders to be confident in the education they are receiving. For instructors, it provides an opportunity to reflect on their teaching methodology and to adjust it to ensure the success of their students. And for students, it is the most consistent mechanism for feedback on their learning and progression.

> The enrolment process should be so much simpler for our students.
>
> **Student experience leader, Australian university**

Some study participants in Australia and the UK said orientation and induction was key to ensuring students get off to the best possible start. This experience can be powerful in framing their whole experience, fostering a sense of belonging and setting them up for long-term success.

Enrolment was seen as important across jurisdictions. When explored further in interviews and roundtables, student experience leaders said their university's enrolment process is often complex and difficult for students to navigate – that is, not student-centric. They also noted current processes are not built to support the educational offerings that are becoming more popular, for example, microcredentials and badges. They said this was a priority and one way to improve lead-to-student conversion rates.

Universities take different approaches to measurement

Monitoring and reporting are critical to understanding student experience and the effectiveness of initiatives to improve it. Student experience leaders said that monitoring and reporting on student experience is a powerful way to understand the effectiveness of student experience initiatives – and to adjust approaches if they are not living up to expectations.

Timeliness was raised as an issue. Many participants noted that much measurement takes place after the fact, but that it could be a much more powerful tool if it were undertaken during the implementation of an initiative. This creates a feedback loop that shows what's working – and what's not – and encourages a virtuous cycle of continuous improvement.

The universities involved in the survey said they use a range of measures to look at the return on investment (ROI) of initiatives and/or services to improve student experience. These include formal measurement against monitoring and reporting framework, benefits frameworks or external benchmarks. Small and very small institutions tend to draw on more formal measures compared to large ones, which are more likely to use informal measures and external benchmarks (see Figure 12).

Even though most institutions understand the importance of measuring the effectiveness of their student experience initiatives, many respondents said this was difficult in practice (two in five respondents raised it as an issue). Challenges included defining what student experience means, determining which initiatives contribute to the student experience, and tracking student's changing needs, their preferences and expectations.

Many institutions are adopting data-informed continuous improvement methods that involve monitoring key performance indicators (KPIs), staff surveys, and student journey maps to identify where improvements in the student journey can be made.

More mature universities are setting up dashboards that draw from these data collection tools to combine measures and metrics into one place. These dashboards provide timely feedback on changing student expectations, what institutions are doing to meet them, and how effective these measures actually are.

> " Keeping up with student changes makes it very challenging to measure student satisfaction.
>
> **Director, Canadian university**

> " Defining what constitutes an outstanding student experience is extremely complex and difficult to measure.
>
> **Director of strategic planning, UK university**

Accountability framework for student experience

A Canadian university has developed, in co-design with more than 700 students, a Student Experience Action Plan that outlines a clear vision of what an outstanding student experience looks like and how the university will deliver that experience. To deliver on the plan, the university has developed an accountability framework and a set of student experience key performance indicators. These KPIs are enabling the university to have specific and measurable metrics to track progress and hold themselves to account on for both quick win initiatives and large scale transformation.[23]

Feedback kiosks enabling the real-time data collection

The University of Glasgow (UK) has feedback kiosks located at key points around the campus and at some student services. This enables the gathering of real-time data about specific campus experiences and allows the university to make direct changes quickly. To show students their feedback is valued, each month a poster is put above the kiosks showing the analysis and resulting actions of the previous month's data.
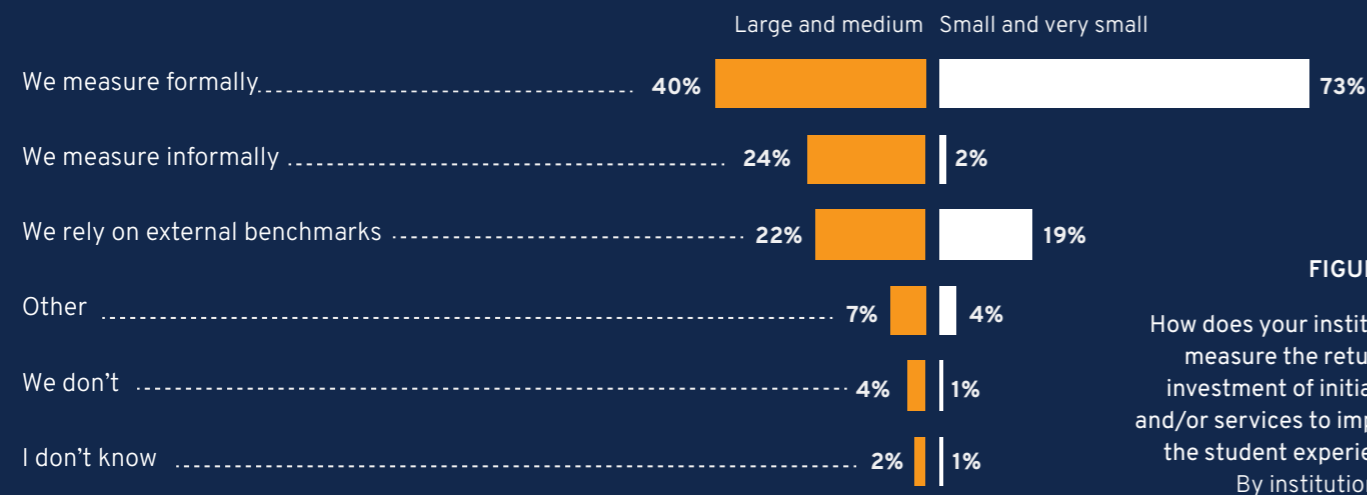
Figure 12

	Large and medium	Small and very small
We measure formally	40%	73%
We measure informally	24%	2%
We rely on external benchmarks	22%	19%
Other	7%	4%
We don't	4%	1%
I don't know	2%	1%

FIGURE 12

How does your institution measure the return on investment of initiatives and/or services to improve the student experience? By institution size

Technology is a cornerstone

Leaders involved in the study emphasised the way in which technology, digital tools and process automation are critical to translating universities' ambitions for outstanding student experience into practice.

"

It is important to work out how we deliver a personalised student experience at scale with the staff who have the right personal and digital skills. [This needs to be] underpinned by the right technology solutions [to] make the experience frictionless for the student.

**Chief Operating Officer,
Australian university**

We are aiming to move to a more bespoke/ tailored experience for our students so that we can meet their diverse needs more easily.

**Director student services,
UK university**

TECHNOLOGY AND DIGITAL TOOLS

Technology is viewed as a critical enabler for improving student experience. Recognising this, most institutions involved in the study have increased or significantly increased their investment in technology in the previous five years to deliver better student support services (see Figures 13 and 14).

We heard during the study how universities have matured their use of customer relationship management (CRM) systems and are increasingly using chatbots and other digital tools to ensure students can access information, advice and guidance 24/7. Some are using artificial intelligence and automation to support a more customised experience and access to services for their students – even as enrolments rapidly rise.[24]

In interviews and roundtables, study participants pointed to institutional investment in technologies that create more integrated systems, enable greater self-service and help tailor services to meet individual needs. Adoption of these technologies also allows students to access the information and support they need when they need them.

The survey found student self-service systems can benefit student experience. More than 50 per cent of universities that provided self-service also rated their student administrative services as 'excellent' or 'very good'.

FIGURE 13

What approaches have been most effective in improving your current student experience?

Approach	%
Improving technology	54%
Targeted initiatives	53%
Building staff capabilities	46%
Co-designing with students	44%
Centralised services	40%
Increasing investment	28%
Third party providers	16%

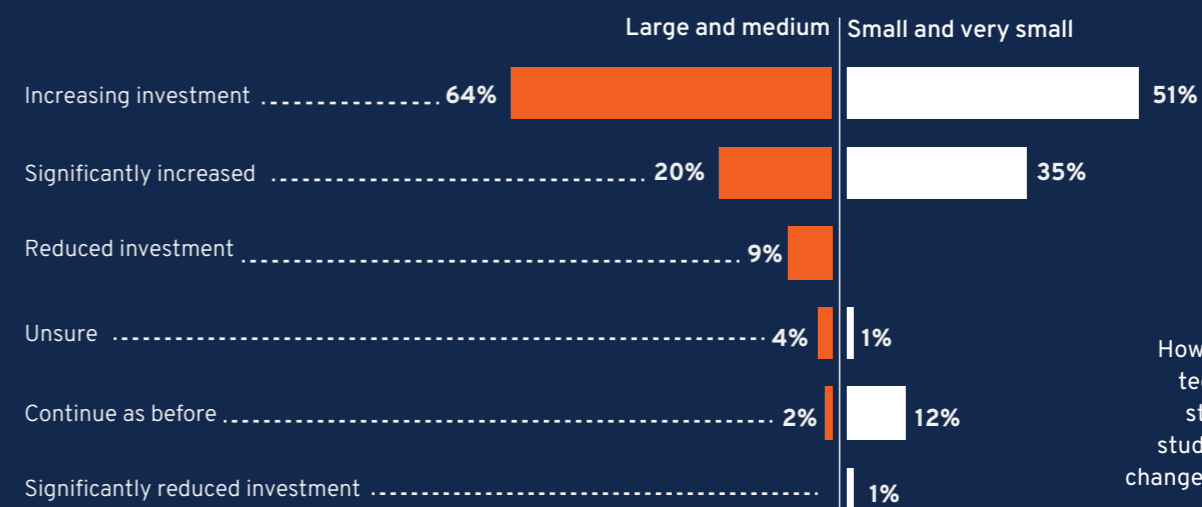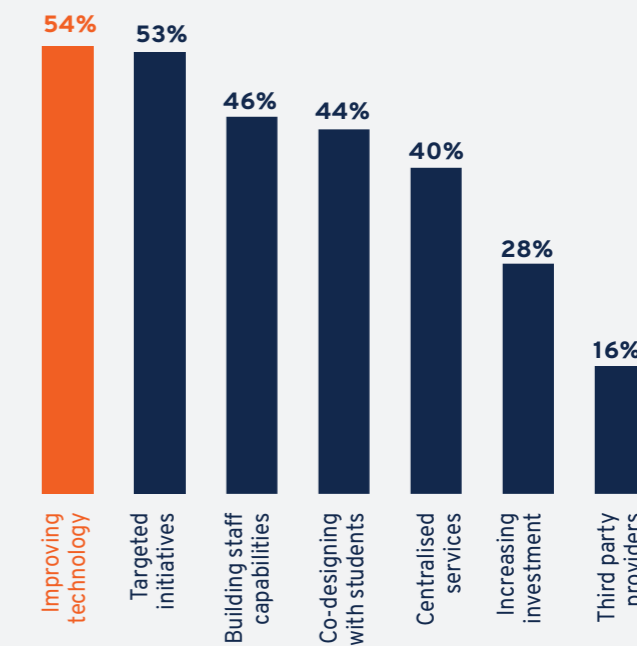|	Large and medium	Small and very small
Increasing investment	64%	51%
Significantly increased	20%	35%
Reduced investment	9%	
Unsure	4%	1%
Continue as before	2%	12%
Significantly reduced investment		1%

FIGURE 14

How has your instituion's technology investment strategy for delivering student support services changed today compared to five years ago?

Furthermore, most of those institutions that do not currently offer student self-service are planning on investing in it over the next two to three years.

When considering technology and digital service delivery, student experience leaders said:

- A fully integrated service platform must be designed as an end-to-end solution from a student experience perspective.

- Technology can identify the moments that matter to prioritise activities and to provide a quality student experience at each stage of the educational journey.

- Root-cause analysis can identify and fix pain points, and uplift self-service capabilities. Analysis should be ongoing to improve self-service systems.

- Solutions are sometimes best designed and implemented with the support of third parties.

PROCESS AUTOMATION

Student experience leaders said process automation (or robotic process automation) was 'game changing' in delivering outstanding student experience (see Figure 15). They emphasised the power of automating administrative services to deliver efficiencies and reduce human error. [25]

Process automation systematises resource-intensive activities to provide better experiences for students and staff. It does this by replicating repetitive, high-volume staff actions across systems, improving speed and accuracy.

Universities told us they focus on systems such as self-service, process automation and chatbots (which are fully integrated with CRMs) to respond to Tier 0 enquiries (basic student questions). This approach is supported by a real-time handoff to a human contact centre as required. This impacts the types of roles required at universities, increasing the number of staff members with a specialist focus (particularly academic) rather than providing generalist support.

EXAMPLES OF GOOD PRACTICE

App supporting student onboarding

The MyOrientation app at Griffith University (Australia) supports student onboarding. Students using the app can arrive on campus with administrative forms already filled in and devices connected to campus Wi-Fi. Griffith monitors students' progress through the app and provides proactive support to those struggling with any aspect of university life. This has reduced the likelihood of students dropping out before they even start their degrees. [26]

Predictive tool for proactive learning support

Nottingham Trent University (NTU, UK) has developed a predictive digital tool to improve learning support services. Evaluation has shown that alerts generated by the NTU's learning analytics tool in cases of no student engagement is effective at identifying at-risk students and more efficient than targeting based on demographics. [27]

FIGURE 15

Which feature(s) would your institution like to invest in over the next 2-3 years? Choose a maximum of three

- Process automation — 65%
- Fully integrated service platform — 56%
- Student self-servicing — 50%
- Case-managed approach model — 49%
- Centres of expertise for specialist services — 44%
- Use of third party providers — 41%
- One stop shop student services — 23%
- Chatbots (or similar) — 21%
- Other — 4%

It also frees up time for staff members to resolve more complex or sensitive issues.

Automating admission processes can:

- speed up response time to students
- pre-fill enrolment forms or student inquiry forms
- send automated reminders or prompts
- check fulfilment of prerequisites for courses
- identify scheduling conflicts
- create candidate shortlists by comparing submitted applications to enrolment requirements.

> Universities are increasingly turning to RPA (robotic process automation) solutions to automate back-office, hybrid and student-facing processes... Often the objectives and outcome include an improved student, faculty and staff experience.

Gartner Top Technology Trends in Higher Education

In 2022, UK universities had record numbers of student applications. [28] Automating manual workflows will help administrative teams manage these increases. A quicker response time may also help universities increase lead-to-student conversion rates in an increasingly competitive market. [29]

Outside the admissions process, universities are using automation to tailor communication and automate requests for transcripts, work-integrated learning, and learning certificates. This is resulting in less human error, better use of staff time, and cost savings that can be invested elsewhere.

For students, automation makes activities such as enrolment much simpler. Many forms can be automatically filled in and uploaded, and students don't need to provide the same information to multiple staff members.

Interview and roundtable participants from universities that automate processes said it was important to set clear business rules for the design and implementation of automated services. For example, extenuating circumstance (EC) requests rules can be used to automate module extensions based on a student's history, previous EC requests, and how much of an extension has been requested.
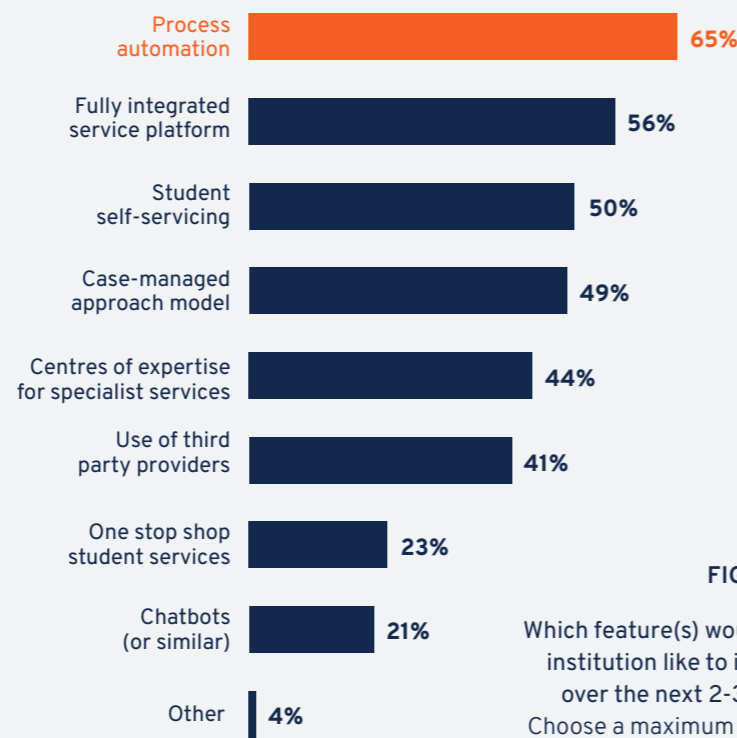

EXAMPLES OF GOOD PRACTICE

Significant changes to student admission

The University of Salford (UK) implemented a series of digital process automation solutions that enabled them to automate key processes within admissions e.g. sending students reminders about required documents and generating offer letters. The new approach involves every application going through a single portal which also enables live tracking of each application. This greatly reduced human error – both administrative and financial – and improved the experience for students.

A single entry point for student enquiries

Deakin University (Australia) implemented a digital Service Management system that provides a single point of entry for all enquiries and enables tracking of progress towards query resolution. Digital workflows and automation simplifies the process for staff and reduces the time to resolution for students, leading to a better experience for both staff and students.

Initiatives must be right time, right place

University leaders noted in the study that their institutions need to be better understand how their services can be better tailored and delivered to different students cohorts in a more targeted manner.

Study participants told us that with fewer resources and less appetite for a wholesale redesign of student experience, they were looking to invest in more targeted initiatives. Many student experience leaders (one in five survey respondents from large and medium institutions) report that funding is a barrier to delivering an outstanding student experience. Furthermore, following the COVID-19 pandemic, study participants note there has not been the same funding buckets available for student experience areas.

In fact, targeted initiatives were considered among the most effective approaches (see Figure 13, p23) and critical for creating an outstanding student experience in the next few years.

When explored further, there was a clear message that providing an outstanding student experience requires services to be tailored to students, so that they can access services when and where they need, irrespective of time or location. This requires using student data to identify the best ways to provide proactive support to all students at their critical points of need.

In our roundtable and interviews, study participants said that even when services are made available, not all students knew what was available to them. Communication challenges was listed as one of the reason for this lack of awareness. Many spoke of a desire and a need to cut through the noise and provide just-in-time communications about new services and mental health supports, or simply to better manage student expectations.

Key to this is personalised communication through the channels that students use, such as social media and personalised apps.

Universities can run pilots and start on a small scale through targeted initiatives, to ensure services are being tailored in the right way. Starting small, and adopting a fast-fail model draws on fewer resources, and provides opportunity to see if behaviour matches students' stated expectations and needs.

> ❝❞
>
> Our budget for student experience is not discretionary in the way that it used to be. We don't have lots of funding to 'try everything'.
>
> **Student experience leader, Australian university**

EXAMPLES OF GOOD PRACTICE

Game-based tech for learning support

Quitch provides targeted teaching and learning support to make learning more engaging, social and enjoyable. Quitch uses gamification to make course material more engaging, where students can test themselves at their own pace. It provides real-time analytics on how students are engaging with their material, so educators can quickly see any who are at risk of falling behind. A recent study found increases in student retention and a difference in average marks between students who did and didn't use the platform.[30]

Tailored support for postgraduate students

Melbourne's La Trobe University introduced a Concierge helpdesk at its city campus to tailor support to its growing number of postgraduate students. This specialised service touchpoint was created due to the unique and individualised needs of postgraduate students and is open outside of traditional business hours to accommodate the majority of postgraduate students who work. Feedback indicates that service has improved student experiences.[31]

Make astute use of third parties

In the study, many universities identified that they are partnering with specialist third parties. They see these providers as integral to the delivery of an outstanding student experience.

We heard that many universities, irrespective of size or location, are using third parties to deliver services across the student journey. These third parties specialise in counselling and mental health services, orientation and induction, careers advice, and employability services (see Figure 16).

Larger institutions use third parties mainly for student attraction and recruitment, housing and accommodation, and counselling. In contrast, smaller institutions tend to use third parties for orientation and induction activities, career services and financial assistance.

Irrespective of size, use of third parties is set to rise, with over one-third of respondents saying they intended to increase investment over the next two to three years. This is based on the recognition that third parties can play a key role in supporting universities.

We heard that universities may use third parties to alleviate pressure on existing services, to deal with increases in demand, or to free up academics' time. Strategically, universities may also partner with others so they can concentrate on areas where they feel they can add most value, such as learning and teaching. Study participants emphasised that partners tend to work best when their remit is clear and they are focused on targeted areas (rather than taking on general responsibilities).
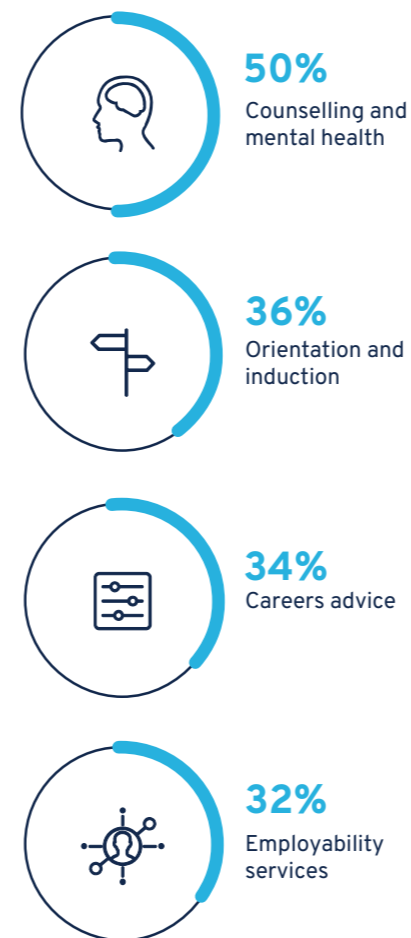
> Third-party providers are so important for doing the things that we don't do as well… This then frees us up to be more focused.

Student experience leader, Australian University

FIGURE 16

For which services are you using third party providers?
Top 4 services selected

50%
Counselling and mental health

36%
Orientation and induction

34%
Careers advice

32%
Employability services

Universities across the three regions are partnering with a variety of third-party providers to change and improve the student experience. Some examples include:

Smartphone app linking to wellbeing support services

Sonder provides students and staff with a smartphone app that gives them 24/7 access to wellbeing and safety professionals and resources. The app also securely aggregates anonymised data that enables the university to see current issues, learn from them, and prevent future problems.

Career management platform making it easier to access employment opportunities

Handshake is an online platform that makes it easier students to access employment opportunities and career teams to manage relationships with employers and track student progress. The platform enables career teams to consolidate their appointments, jobs, events and student performance tracking through a single dashboard, replacing excel documents and reducing manual processes. This allows the careers team to spend more time with students and alumni, and build new relationships with employers. Since rolling out the platform, one university reported a nine-fold increase in opportunities posted at the university and a significant increase in employee connections.[32]

Partnering to deliver online academic development and literacy support services to improve student outcomes

Studiosity provides online academic development and literacy support services for students. Eligible students have 24/7 access to academic writing specialists and online core skills tutors, providing students with a review of writing assessment drafts focusing on academic literacy, and one-on-one assistance focusing on core academic skills in live chat sessions. A recent Nous study on Studiosity student retention ROI found better academic performance, higher retention rates; lower rates of subject failure and fewer students on academic probation, and a return on investment of 4:1.

Centralised delivery is effective

The most effective and cohesive student service operating models were identified to be the ones which had functions, activities and teams centralised around student experience and success.

The institutions that rate themselves as most effective trend to have a more centralised operating model for student services. The study identified a significant shift towards centralised operating models for student experience and student support services. Importantly, research undertaken by Nous has found that while the shift to centralisation is key, fully centralised is not ideal. Universities must determine the balance of what is centralised versus devolved.

More than 80 per cent of institutions that followed a centralised model (evaluated as being more than 60 per cent centralised) rated their student administration as 'excellent' or 'very good' at enabling great student experiences. In contrast, around 30 per cent of universities with less centralised models (evaluated as being less than 60 per cent centralised) rated their administrative services at this level (see Figure 17).

Institutions use centralisation to improve the student experience and create operational efficiencies. They do this by:

1. establishing clear and defined responsibilities across functions to eliminate or minimise duplication, and to provide clear key performance indicators for these functions

2. creating clear handover points between functions to minimise the risk of 'losing' student enquiries in the data transfer between teams

3. increasing the ability to share resources across clusters to meet surges in demand and maintain a consistent student experience

4. developing a student-centric culture by instilling shared personal and institutional responsibilities for student success and giving teams across the university the knowledge to work collaboratively to connect students with the best-equipped departments for their needs.

5. various leaders noted that three different teams might have a role in the same process, which can make it very difficult to have a single picture.

Despite the support for centralisation of the student experience functions, student experience leaders told us that faculties and departments still have an important role where highly specialised knowledge and bespoke advice is required.

FIGURE 17

What percentage of your student support services are centralised?
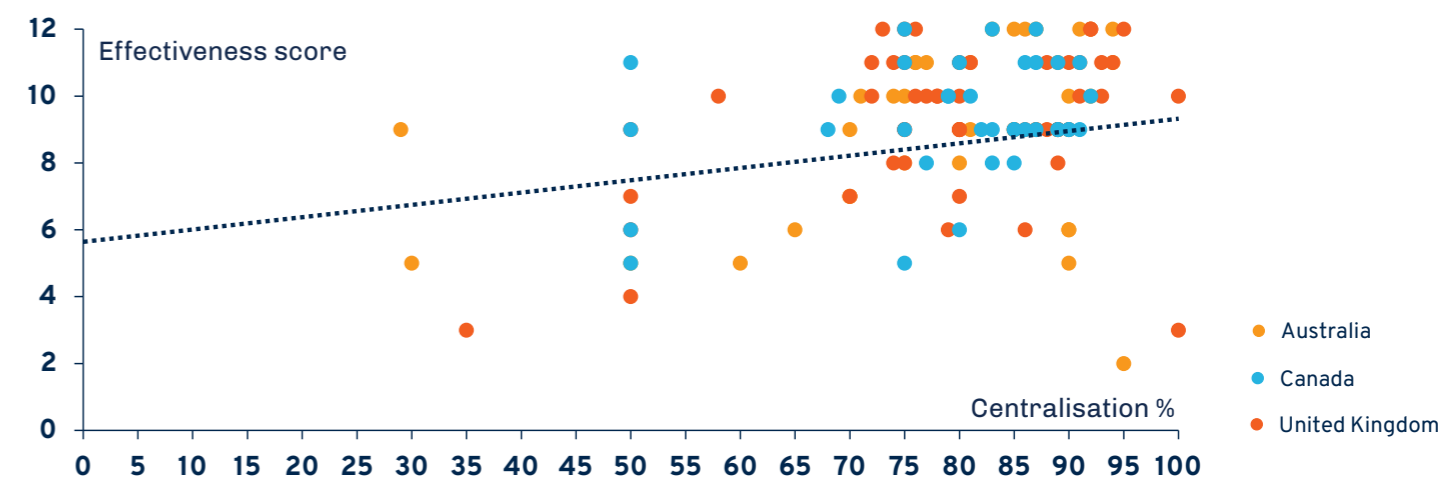
- Australia
- Canada
- United Kingdom

Centralised graduate administration services

A research-intensive Australian university centralised its graduate administration services in a single graduate school. They created specialist roles to provide program-specific support to students and faculty, replacing existing distributed supports. The central School of Graduate Studies (SGS) liaises with institutional divisions' graduate programs to provide consistent support and advice, whether it be specialised or generic. The new model has been successful, with professional staff reporting greater consistently and quality of support for students and faculty staff.

Recruitment, admissions, and onboarding in a single team

An Australian university integrated several functions related to recruitment, admissions and onboarding into a single team, moving away from the traditional approach of having functions separated across the university by cohort (undergraduate, postgraduate, international etc.). This has produced a more coordinated effort that supports lead-to-student conversion, with recruitment and admissions supported by competitive offers to students.

OBSERVATION 7

Capability and culture matter

A culture of student success is replacing the historical compliance culture. Study respondents noted that leadership involvement and accountability are key to driving this shift in culture.

Our study found that universities believe building staff capabilities can improve student experience, with one in three survey respondents in Australia and one in two respondents in Canada and the UK describing it as one of the most effective approaches.

Interestingly, institutions that self-rated their student support service's ability to provide an outstanding student experience as 'excellent' tended to report that 'staff skills and capabilities' were among the main barriers to providing an outstanding student experience. For smaller institutions with fewer than 5,000 students study participants listed 'staff skills and capabilities' as their second-greatest barrier to implementing student experience improvements, behind technology.

Respondents identified emerging skills that enable staff to deliver outstanding student experiences as:

· interpersonal skills

· communication

· data management and literacy

· mental health support.

Staff members' ability to use data was also mentioned often in the roundtables.

Leaders in many of our interviews and roundtables said institutional culture was a critical piece of the student experience puzzle. Mindsets and behaviours they said needed to change include:
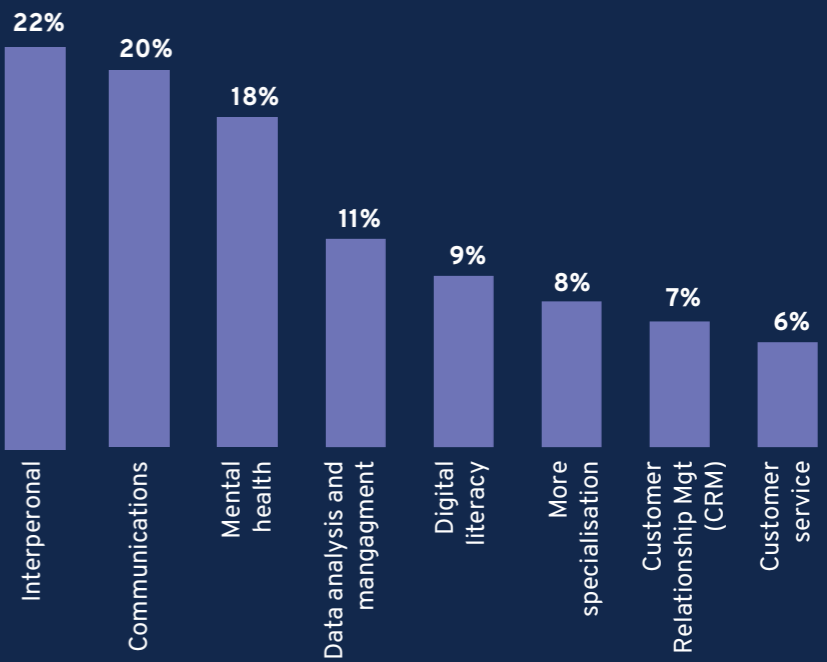
· lack of a unified approach across an institution to create a seamless experience for students, which may lead to a lack of clear handoff points across the student journey

· piecemeal solutions that prevent a holistic view of the student journey

· a lack of willingness to empower staff to test and iterate new approaches and not always go for the 'gold-plated' solution

· failure to ensure that student experience is seen as a priority, irrespective of staffing level.

Furthermore, many interviewees noted how a compliance culture can overtake a culture of student success. With this, systems are designed to help the university be compliant, rather than considering what makes it easy for the student.

❝

We want to do more co-design but many staff don't have the required skills or capabilities to work in this way.

Student services leader, UK university

FIGURE 18

What are the most important emerging skills for student support staff in delivering an outstanding student experience?

Maximum of three responses

Interpersonal	Communications	Mental health	Data analysis and management	Digital literacy	More specialisation	Customer Relationship Mgt (CRM)	Customer service
22%	20%	18%	11%	9%	8%	7%	6%

LEADERSHIP INVOLVEMENT AND ACCOUNTABILITY ARE KEY

Study participants in roundtables and interviews said systematic accountability and governance mechanisms were important to ensure leaders deliver on their student experience obligations. Collecting and monitoring data is not enough. Measures to hold leaders to account and ensure continuous improvement are needed if universities wish to deliver an outstanding student experience.

Suggested approaches included:

- performance funds to provide financial incentives to improve the student experience

- at-risk budgeting to incentivise a focus on the student experience

- dedicated initiatives to support targeted performance improvements, including clearly articulated KPI expectations.

> "
>
> There are difficulties aligning senior leadership's spoken goals with commitments and often results in a focus reverting to compliance requirements.
>
> **Director of student services, Australian university**

EXAMPLES OF GOOD PRACTICE

Delivering innovative teaching

The University of Birmingham (UK) has established the Higher Education Futures institute (HEFi) with a mission to support staff to deliver innovative and inclusive research-intensive teaching. It seeks to prepare students for get the most out of their learning experience and be prepared for their futures.[33] The intention is to support staff alongside implementing university-wide initiatives around teaching and support learning. With an open access approach, HEFi also looks to facilitate shared learning between staff across the sector.

Embedding Student Success Officers

The University of Leeds (UK) is seeking to improve access and student success by embedding Student Success Officers and School Academic Leads for Inclusive Pedagogies (SALIPs). A recent review found that these roles help make the Access and Student Success Strategy more visible at the school level and encouraged trickle-down of initiatives. These roles also build capabilities in tackling barriers to students feeling a sense of belonging and thriving.[34]

Learning Analytics Centre of Excellence

The University of Wisconsin-Madison (UW-Madison, United States) has a Learning Analytics Center of Excellence which provides support to get the most out of teaching and learning data to better support educational practice on campus. One of the team's goal is to support data empowered education practices, including building capability for learning analytics across all schools, colleges, divisions and program.[35]

Conclusion

Again and again, our study participants delivered a clear message. Universities want practical solutions to deliver outstanding student experience and improve outcomes for their students. But as higher education institutions come under increasing financial, operational and other pressures, they can struggle to turn aspiration into concrete change.

While it is not always about significant transformation given these pressures, universities can take practical steps to maintain and improve the student experience to move from good to great.

Strategic investment and careful design leads to far better student experience. This can support universities convert more leads into enrolments, and enrolments into graduations. Monitoring, feedback and reporting can provide greater alignment between how students rate the experience and how universities perceive they are performing.

Student experience initiatives should be informed by pilots and sophisticated data collection and analysis, with data on 'what students actually do' collected alongside what they say they will do or would like to do. While data is a game-changer, it isn't the end of the tech story. Self-service, process automation, chatbots, platforms and a range of other digital tools are transforming student experience.

Universities also need to consider how each initiative for student experience is delivered cohesively in the broader university ecosystem of faculties and schools, administrative centres and support services. This can increase awareness of the importance of student experience and ensure all academic and professional staff can use systems (particularly digital ones).

Student experience leaders in universities are savvy, passionate people and focussed on the multifaceted dimensions of who students are and what is required to deliver student success. Today's students should feel confident that these leaders are propelling their universities to convert the promise of an outstanding student experience into reality.

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ENDNOTES

1   The study included institutions defined as 'very small' (<5,000 equivalent full-time student load (EFTSL)/full-time equivalent (FTE)), 'small' (5,000–20,000 EFTSL/FTE), 'medium' (20,000–30,000 EFTSL/FTE) and 'large' (30,000+ EFTSL/FTE).

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