A Student's Perspective: Valuable Insights for University Leaders

What university leaders can do to support student success

UK EDITION

In the increasingly challenging realm of higher education, understanding the evolving needs, preferences, and expectations of students is paramount to helping ensure their retention, completion, and long-term success. This is against a backdrop of learners having more options and opportunities today to gain skills than ever before, as well as the value of higher education being questioned to a higher degree in parts of the world in recent years.

Anthology conducted a global survey of more than 5,000 higher education leaders and current students in eleven countries to provide context and perspective from students and leaders about the opportunities, challenges, preferences, and technology impact across a number of areas.

Through this research, Anthology aims to contribute to the enhancement of the higher education experience for students and universities as they work together to refine, and in some cases redefine, how teaching and learning take place. This includes providing actionable recommendations to improve services, support systems, and learning environments.

Here, the focus will be on the perspective of leaders and students in the United Kingdom to identify these opportunities and recommendations.
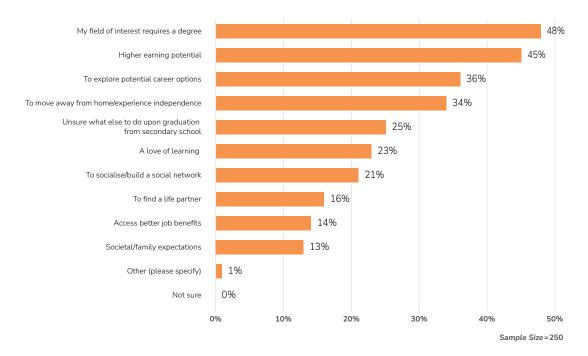
Student Motivations:
From Enroling to the Push for Completion and the Challenges in Between

Students have different reasons for enroling in university and in pushing to complete their degree. A deeper understanding of their perspective can help universities adjust communications with future prospective students, but also provide additional services to ensure that students are successful while at university through to graduation. Students face a variety of challenges during their university career. By being aware of these challenges, university leadership will be better prepared to identify opportunities to support students and, in doing so, they will help more students continue their studies and complete their degree.

Motivations for enroling

What were your primary motivations for enroling at your current university?
(Please select up to three responses)

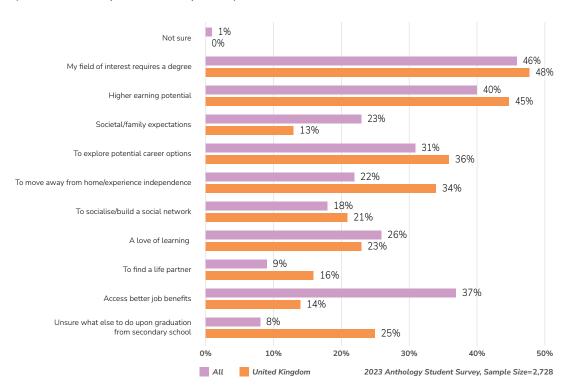| Motivation	Percentage
My field of interest requires a degree	48%
Higher earning potential	45%
To explore potential career options	36%
To move away from home/experience independence	34%
Unsure what else to do upon graduation from secondary school	25%
A love of learning	23%
To socialise/build a social network	21%
To find a life partner	16%
Access better job benefits	14%
Societal/family expectations	13%
Other (please specify)	1%
Not sure	0%

Sample Size=250

The primary reasons for enroling at university among UK students are more practical in nature, led by their field of interest requiring a degree and the higher earning potential that comes with a university degree, as noted in the above chart. However, there are also other key reasons, including exploring potential careers and moving away from home to gain independence. The desire for independence is a higher motivator among UK students than among respondents from other countries.

Another strong motivating factor for students in the UK that was in significant contrast with their peers in other countries is uncertainty. One in four respondents in the UK said one of their primary motivations for enroling at university was that they were unsure what else to do upon graduation from secondary

school. This highlights a higher degree of uncertainty among students entering UK universities — further substantiating the need for increased student support.

Outside of academics and workforce preparation, social and personal outlets are also important motivating factors to attend university for students in the UK. One in five students indicated that socialising/building a social network was one of their primary drivers for enroling at university. And 16% of students in the UK said finding a life partner was one of their top three motivations for enroling in university — placing this motivation higher for students in the UK than students in any of the other countries surveyed.

What were your primary motivations for enroling at your current university?
(Please select up to three responses)

Motivation	All	United Kingdom
Not sure	1%	0%
My field of interest requires a degree	46%	48%
Higher earning potential	40%	45%
Societal/family expectations	23%	13%
To explore potential career options	31%	36%
To move away from home/experience independence	22%	34%
To socialise/build a social network	18%	21%
A love of learning	26%	23%
To find a life partner	9%	16%
Access better job benefits	37%	14%
Unsure what else to do upon graduation from secondary school	8%	25%

All **United Kingdom**   *2023 Anthology Student Survey, Sample Size=2,728*

Opportunities for universities

Based on this data, universities have opportunities to ensure that students can learn about potential career options throughout their education, given that this was important to more than one in three students. This may also be helpful for the group of students who didn't know what else to do. This response is perhaps the most concerning as these students are probably among the least likely to complete their degree. They likely will need more support than students who have identified their field of interest prior to enroling in university, and as such, universities should seek to proactively identify students who are less certain to be able to better guide them.

In addition, knowing the importance students in the UK place on socialising as a motivating factor for attending university, leadership can review the programmes available to help students build their networks and make connections. Increasing social activities on campus, reviewing orientation programmes, and creating online communities can foster community and provide opportunities for students to connect.
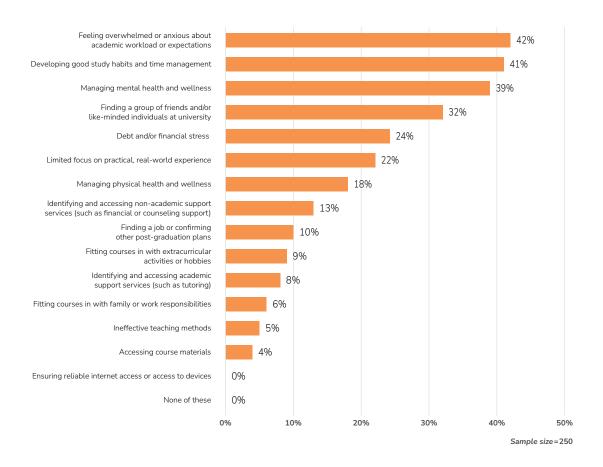
Motivations for completing a degree

Current students are primarily driven to complete their degree due to the potential of earning a higher income (40%) and having access to broader employment opportunities (35%), while also looking to gain lifelong skills (35%). For nearly one in three, it is also due to a commitment to finish what they started — this was higher than in any other country — while for slightly over one in four students, the focus is on pursuing an advanced degree or gaining a position in their field of interest. Overall, the large majority of students are motivated to complete their degree because of the benefits to be gained from earning that degree.

Universities should consider using the motivational data for enroling and for completion to inform communications to prospective students about the reasons for enroling at their institution or in higher education in general, including a focus on earning potential, broader employment opportunities, and preparation for a career. This could help draw more students to the university as students will see that there is clearer alignment with their expectations.

Challenges in the last 12 months

However, as mentioned previously, the student experience is not without challenges for UK students. All respondents identified at least one significant challenge they faced in the last year.

Challenge	Percentage
Feeling overwhelmed or anxious about academic workload or expectations	42%
Developing good study habits and time management	41%
Managing mental health and wellness	39%
Finding a group of friends and/or like-minded individuals at university	32%
Debt and/or financial stress	24%
Limited focus on practical, real-world experience	22%
Managing physical health and wellness	18%
Identifying and accessing non-academic support services (such as financial or counseling support)	13%
Finding a job or confirming other post-graduation plans	10%
Fitting courses in with extracurricular activities or hobbies	9%
Identifying and accessing academic support services (such as tutoring)	8%
Fitting courses in with family or work responsibilities	6%
Ineffective teaching methods	5%
Accessing course materials	4%
Ensuring reliable internet access or access to devices	0%
None of these	0%

Sample size=250

The highest percentage of students — nearly one of every two — reported one of the most pressing challenges was feeling overwhelmed or anxious about academic workload or expectations. In addition, nearly the same percentage indicated that managing mental health and wellness was a key challenge. Overall, this highlights the reality of the student experience over the past year. Universities should be aware of these and other challenges that students are facing and identify ways to support students.

Additionally, a comparatively high percentage mentioned needing to develop good study habits and time management (second highest of all countries surveyed, only behind Singapore), as well as finding a group of friends and/or like-minded individuals at university. These are additional stressors that impact student's wellbeing and their likelihood of success. Having a group of friends has been shown to directly impact a student's sense of belonging, which impacts their likelihood to remain at university (Stayhorn, 2018; O'Keeffe, 2013). Universities should review where there may be opportunities to build community, whether during orientation, by supporting a range of student clubs and societies, and/or by making it easy for students to connect with other students virtually.

While there is much discussed about the cost of higher education, this was only highlighted by about one in four respondents. Universities should identify students who are concerned about financial stressors to identify whether more can be done to assist them.

There are clear actions that universities should consider based on this data. Prioritising mental health support for students seems paramount based on the responses — while this may not be fully in a university's remit, ensuring that students are aware of mental health services that are available and can access these services is *critical*. Additionally, universities should consider ways to reduce the anxiety or pressure from academic expectations, including how to better support students to ensure they feel prepared and have strong study and time management skills.

Overall, the large majority of students face challenges throughout their time at university and this can impact their academic success as well as their happiness and sense of wellbeing.
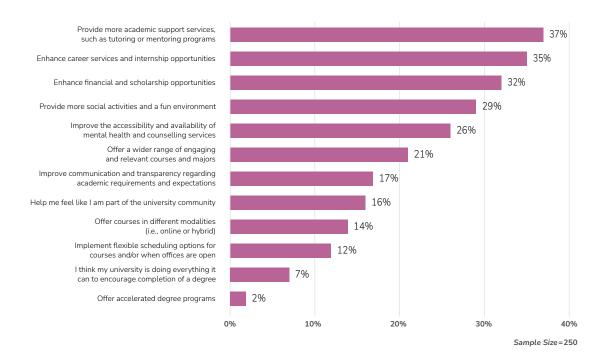
Opportunities for Universities:
Student Needs and Leader Perspectives — The Balancing Act

Given the challenges that students identified, respondents were asked to share how their university could help them and their classmates complete their degrees. University leaders were asked a similar question to help determine whether there was alignment between students and university leaders on opportunities.
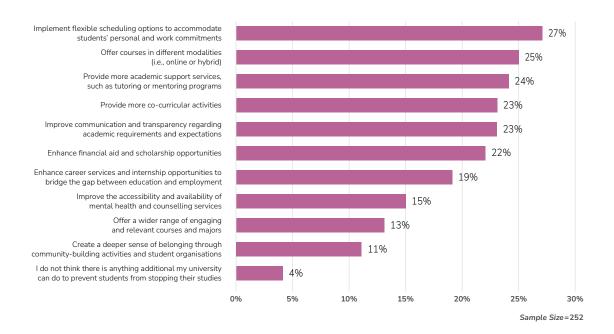
Student perspective chart

What do you think your university can do to help you and your classmates be more likely to complete your degree?

Response	%
Provide more academic support services, such as tutoring or mentoring programs	37%
Enhance career services and internship opportunities	35%
Enhance financial and scholarship opportunities	32%
Provide more social activities and a fun environment	29%
Improve the accessibility and availability of mental health and counselling services	26%
Offer a wider range of engaging and relevant courses and majors	21%
Improve communication and transparency regarding academic requirements and expectations	17%
Help me feel like I am part of the university community	16%
Offer courses in different modalities (i.e., online or hybrid)	14%
Implement flexible scheduling options for courses and/or when offices are open	12%
I think my university is doing everything it can to encourage completion of a degree	7%
Offer accelerated degree programs	2%

Sample Size=250

Leader perspective chart

What do you believe are the most important actions your university can take to help students stay enrolled and complete their degrees?

Implement flexible scheduling options to accommodate students' personal and work commitments — 27%
Offer courses in different modalities (i.e., online or hybrid) — 25%
Provide more academic support services, such as tutoring or mentoring programs — 24%
Provide more co-curricular activities — 23%
Improve communication and transparency regarding academic requirements and expectations — 23%
Enhance financial aid and scholarship opportunities — 22%
Enhance career services and internship opportunities to bridge the gap between education and employment — 19%
Improve the accessibility and availability of mental health and counselling services — 15%
Offer a wider range of engaging and relevant courses and majors — 13%
Create a deeper sense of belonging through community-building activities and student organisations — 11%
I do not think there is anything additional my university can do to prevent students from stopping their studies — 4%

Sample Size=252

More than one in three students pointed to opportunities to provide more academic support services, including tutoring and mentoring programmes, as well as enhancing career services and internship opportunities. This was followed by enhancing financial aid and scholarship opportunities, and by providing more social activities. University leaders were generally aligned on two of these four (although with fewer leaders citing these than students): providing more academic support services, ranking it third highest; and providing more co-curricular activities, ranking it fourth highest.

University leaders focused most on implementing more flexible schedules and offering courses in different modalities. While this may seem important, especially given the shifts during and after the pandemic, it is notable that these were much lower on the list for student respondents, capturing interest from 12% and 14% of students, respectively. Only 15% of university leaders cited improving mental health services as important, a difference compared to student respondents of 24%. This is a noticeable difference and leaders should consider how their institution can improve support. A similar misalignment was related to enhancing career services, with a 16% gap between student sentiment and that of university leaders. Clearly, students are concerned about employment and the level of career support. Universities have an opportunity to grow support in that area to reduce student anxiety and concerns.

One in two UK students prefer face-to-face courses, with 22% of students preferring a mix of face-to-face courses with some online elements

In perhaps surprising data for university leaders, one in two UK students prefer face-to-face courses, with 22% of students preferring a mix of face-to-face courses with some online elements. This matches very closely with how courses are currently being offered based on the responses by university leaders (a difference of at most 4%). There is also alignment regarding fully online courses, with 18% of students looking for fully online courses and a similar percentage of university leaders reporting that the majority of courses at their institution are offered fully online.

Overall, while there is some alignment, there is further opportunity for universities to consider other avenues to support students during their studies based on these results.

Opportunities to Improve the Student Experience with Technology

In a more connected world, students are looking for technology to help them be more efficient. This study asked a series of questions related to ways that technology could be helpful to determine the level of interest on the part of students.

Universities should seek to reduce the number of systems or platforms that students have to use to complete assignments and other university processes — 65% of students strongly agreed or agreed with the statement that there are too many systems to use. This presents an opportunity for university leaders to identify efficiencies in systems, and in doing so, also get better access to student data (94% of university leaders agree that a holistic view of a student would benefit their team and their students).

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One area where there has already been progress is that most students (87%) report having access to a self-service portal where they can view academic progress to see if they are on track. However, 40% feel that while the information is provided, it is not easy to consume. For the 13% of students who do not have this type of information readily available, it is critical for institutions to invest in technology to help inform students of their progress (note that 13% of university leaders also indicated that their institution did not have technology in place for this). All students indicated that having such a portal would be helpful to them.

Students are looking for more support, and one of the opportunities is through more personalised communications from their university. The large majority of students would find the following types of information helpful to receive:

- Reminders about upcoming deadlines such as course registrations, etc. (92%)

- Recommendations for courses to take based on their major (88%)

- Reminders about assignments due in class (87%)

- Information about upcoming student organisation events (86%)

- Recommendations of courses to take based on career goals (84%)

Where there was more hesitation related to value was for recommendations of courses to take based on prior grades, although 67% of students would still find it very or somewhat helpful.

Providing reminders about assignments being due and when course registration starts are easy opportunities for success, as many of these features are already built into learning management systems and CRM platforms. Universities should encourage faculty members to use the learning management system for all courses, as this creates a consistent experience for students as far as receiving reminders about assignments that are due as well as how assignments are turned in. The more consistency that can be provided in these ways, the more likely students will turn assignments in by the due date and be successful.

Overall, these are areas that present opportunities to universities to increase their use of data and technology to deliver more detailed recommendations more efficiently. Incorporating recommended courses will result in conversations with advisors being more focused, as students will have already been able to explore recommendations on their own.

In addition, students want to have course content available to them in a variety of ways. Sixty percent of students indicated that being able to read content from the learning management system on their mobile device would be extremely or very helpful, while 59% felt that the ability to choose whether to listen to or read course content would be extremely or very helpful. Universities should work with faculty members and encourage them to make content available in these ways, as it increases the likelihood that students will consume the content.

In considering how best to communicate with students, they continue to prefer email as the primary way to hear from the university with 49% indicating that more personalised communications with relevant information are preferred as one of two favoured methods of communication, followed by more general broadcast emails (41%). The next highest option was text messages at 21% of respondents. This can be helpful as universities consider how to best reach students. Overall, 81% of students indicated a preference for email communications.

Methodology

Data collection was conducted online among university leaders and students across eleven countries in August 2023, including Australia, Brazil, Mexico, the Philippines, Saudi Arabia, Singapore, South Africa, Spain, the United Kingdom, the United Arab Emirates and the United States. Separate questionnaires with similar questions were utilised to enable comparisons. To qualify, student respondents had to indicate that they were currently enrolled at a higher education institution and pursuing a degree or diploma. University leader respondents had to indicate that they were currently senior leaders (dean, provost, rector, etc.) at a higher education institution. In total, 2,617 university leaders and 2,728 students qualified for and completed the survey.

About Anthology

Anthology offers the largest EdTech ecosystem on a global scale for education, supporting more than 150 million users in 80 countries. With a mission to provide dynamic, data-informed experiences to the global education community through Anthology Intelligent Experiences™, we help learners, leaders and educators achieve their goals by offering over 60 SaaS products and services designed to advance learning. Discover more about how we are fulfilling our mission for education, business, and government institutions at **www.anthology.com**.

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