University Leaders: Opportunities for Higher Education

Improving the student experience through technology

Global Edition

It is proven that understanding the evolving needs, preferences, and expectations of students in higher education is paramount to ensuring their retention, program completion, and long-term success.

Anthology conducted a global survey of more than 5,000 active students and higher education leaders in 11 countries, providing fundamental and context perspectives about the opportunities, challenges, preferences, and technological impact across a number of areas, including artificial intelligence (AI).

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

Key Findings:

- 90% of leaders feel that there is at least one thing their institution can do to increase the likelihood of students staying enrolled and completing their degree.

- 89% of university leaders agree that more personalized experiences will help a greater number of students achieve their goals. There is, however, a significant gap between this understanding and what the universities are currently doing.

- 87% of university leaders agree that having a holistic view of students as individuals would benefit both the students and their team.

- 76% of students expect their university to assist them in finding a job after graduation. While most leaders report having career information, only 47% make it available to students or advisors.

- Over half of universities use five or more systems to track student information, reporting that key data is not available to their teams. This data would likely have a positive impact on the student experience.

- Only 28% of universities have complete system integrations.

- Less than 20% of universities have real-time integrated data access; enrollment and finance are the two areas where data is used the most.

Opportunities to Improve the Student Experience with Technology

In a more connected world, society turns to technology to assist in optimizing efficiency. We examined the interactions between students, university leaders, and new technology, uncovering where the technology is utilized, and how it contributes to the prosperity of the education system—particularly student development.

Importance of Personalization

University leaders typically agreed that more personalized experiences would contribute to student success. However, only 38% felt that their institution has the technology capable of creating such personalized student interactions in a pragmatic way.

Generally, university leaders recognize that technology is needed to achieve deeper personalization goals. Integrating meaningful connections throughout the student's journey opens new doors for productivity, in part due to the newfound role the digital landscape plays in our everyday lives. Capabilities like engagement and activity tracking via CRM, or the integration of existing technological solutions which optimize data flow, create personalized experiences for students that mimic the ones they experience in their personal lives, such as social media and streaming services.

Additionally, university leaders agreed that having a holistic view of a student would be beneficial to both the students and the greater faculty. Leveraging a holistic view of the student across the institution will allow universities to be more proactive in how they engage with students, streamlining education processes and services.

These findings are aligned with Anthology's past observations that many institutions retain an incredible amount of data; however, that data is scattered, bypassing the benefits of a single, unified protocol. By connecting these data sets, we can help highlight trends in the student experience, creating the opportunity to provide better experiences to both students and staff. This would ensure student success, enhancing the process of accreditation and assessment, and driving institution-wide strategic initiatives.

Leaders believe holistic data views and more personalized interactions will be beneficial; however, the universities are not doing enough

Q: Please rate your level of agreement with the following statements:
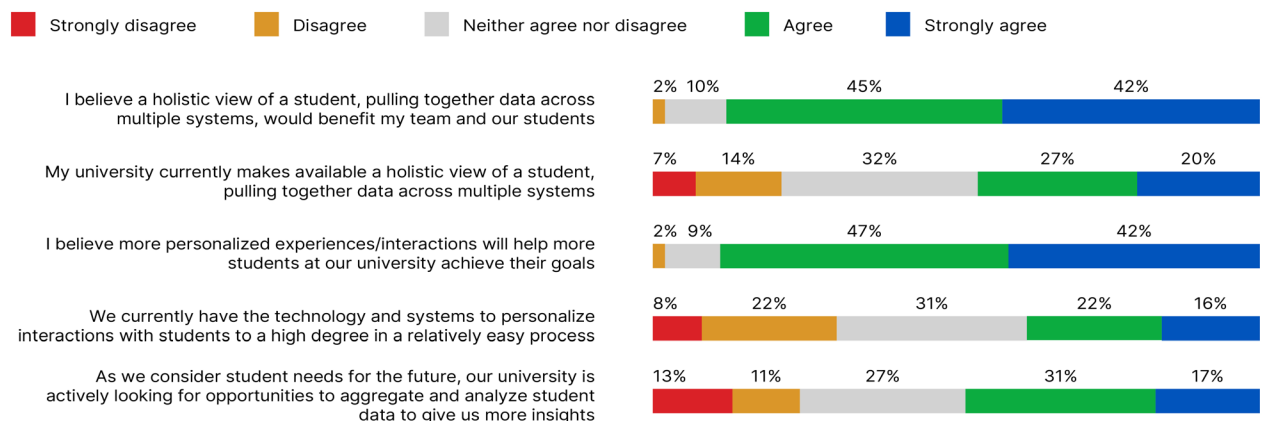
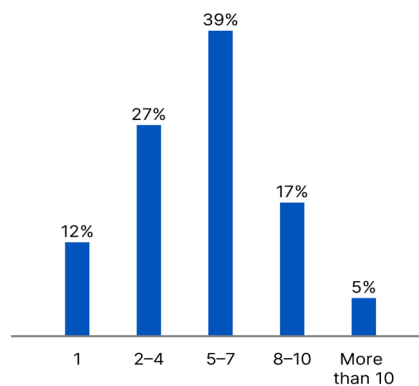Sample size: 2,617 university leaders

Impact of University Systems and Barriers to Engaging with Students

Holistic data can be challenging to gather and process due to the number of systems in use at any given institution. **Seventy-three percent of students indicated that there were too many systems in use, both in regards to submitting assignments and completing university processes.**

The majority of respondents indicated that their institution is using between five and seven systems to track student data and/or student progress. **Any opportunity to reduce systems is therefore likely to be beneficial in terms of increasing efficiency and ensuring data is more readily available.**

Over half of universities use five or more systems to track student information; most have limited integration with each other

University systems

Q: How many systems or resources do you feel your university is using to track student data and/or student progress?

Sample size: 2,617 university leaders

System integrations

Yes, across all departments and/or schools (faculties) — 28%

Yes, but only for some departments and/or schools (faculties) — 23%

No, but we have started discussing opportunities to do so — 20%

No, we have not formally integrated any technology applications or student data systems for this purpose and have not started to do so — 25%

I do not know — 4%

Q: Has your university integrated different technologies across the university? For example, does your LMS (learning management system) or early alert system connect to your SIS (student information system) or another system you use to look up student academic information?
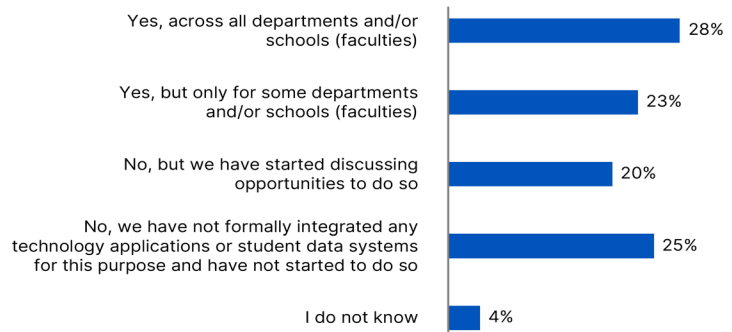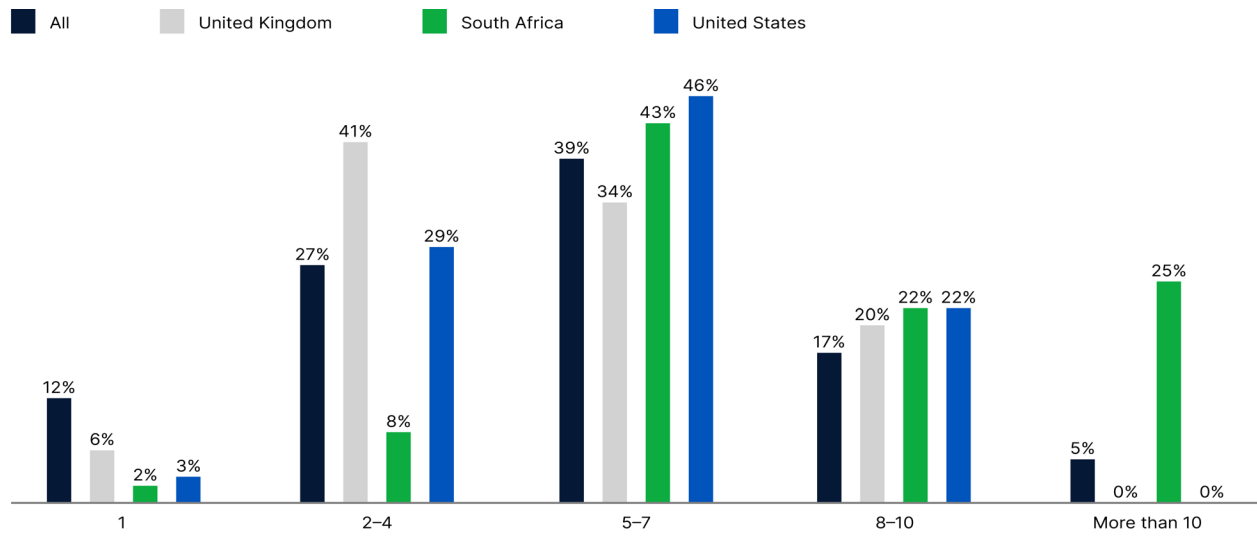
Sample size: 2,617 university leaders

How many systems or resources do you feel your university is using to track student data and/or student progress? (By country)

Legend: ■ All ■ United Kingdom ■ South Africa ■ United States

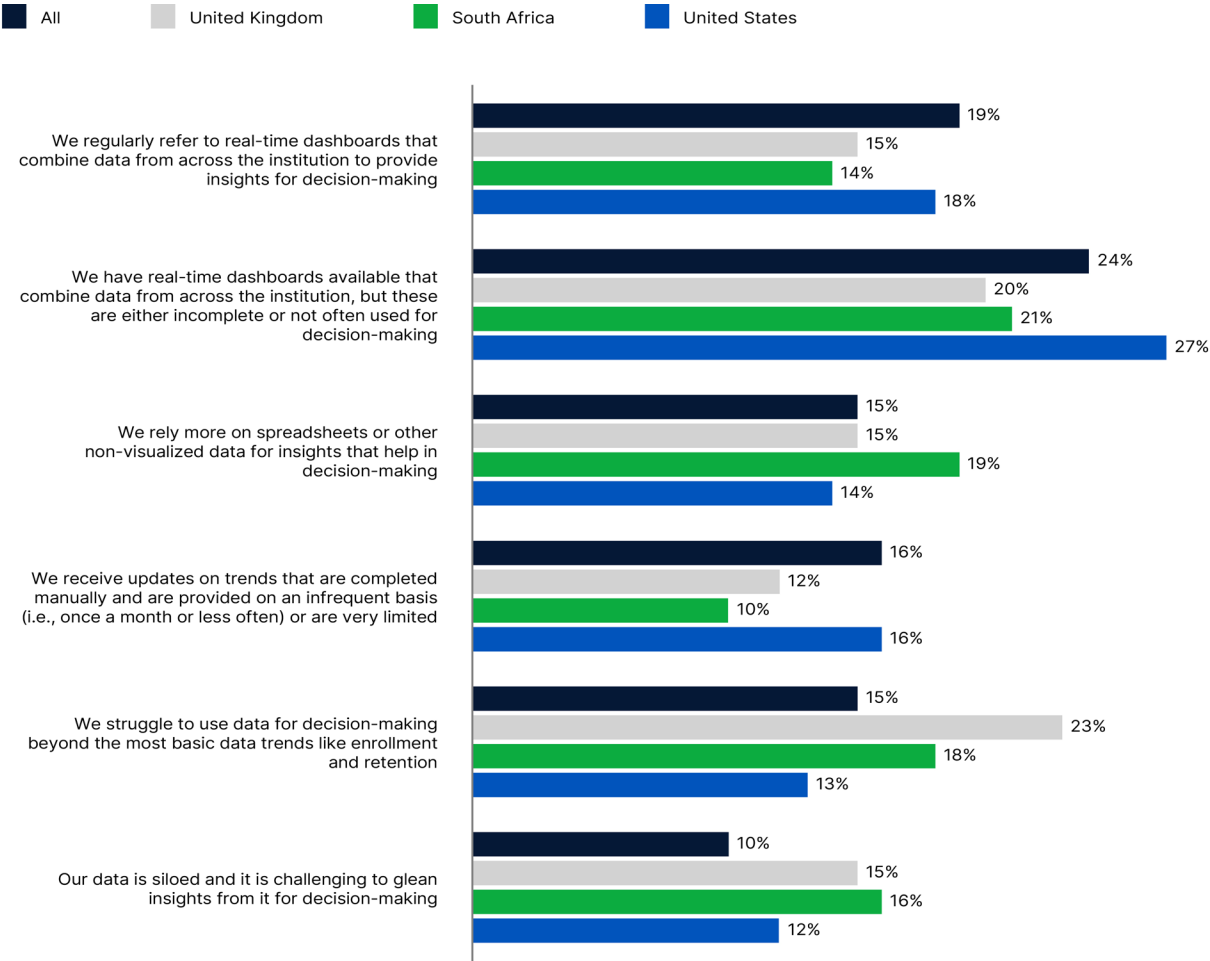| Category	All	United Kingdom	South Africa	United States
1	12%	6%	2%	3%
2–4	27%	41%	8%	29%
5–7	39%	34%	43%	46%
8–10	17%	20%	22%	22%
More than 10	5%	0%	25%	0%

Sample size: 755 university leaders

Only around one in four university leaders indicated that different technologies have been integrated across all departments and schools, while 23% report that this has been done for some departments. **An additional 20% have started discussions regarding how integration may be achieved.**

University leaders also report that key data likely to have a positive impact on the student experience is not available to their individual departments. This includes reported student sentiment (level of frustration, confidence) (48%), frequency of engagement with other students or instructor (47%), frequency of engagement with course content (43%), and student support engagement/alerts (33%) being the top items selected. On the other hand, it appears that most universities provide good access to information on course attendance, student demographics, assessment results, and pre-matriculation data.

Data for Decision-Making

Perhaps the fundamental issue of having multiple systems is the lack of a single, all-encompassing view of data. Leaders in all countries surveyed indicated some level of challenge in using data for decision-making. One in four university leaders in the United States said they either lacked or underutilized a comprehensive data system, with leaders in the United Kingdom indicating they struggled to use data for decision-making beyond the most basic data trends like enrollment and retention. Only 18% of leaders in the United States regularly refer to real-time dashboards that combine data from across the institution to gain insights for decision-making.

How is your institution currently using data and insights to inform decision-making? Please select the option that best matches your institution. (By country)

■ All   ■ United Kingdom   ■ South Africa   ■ United States

We regularly refer to real-time dashboards that combine data from across the institution to provide insights for decision-making
- 19%
- 15%
- 14%
- 18%

We have real-time dashboards available that combine data from across the institution, but these are either incomplete or not often used for decision-making
- 24%
- 20%
- 21%
- 27%

We rely more on spreadsheets or other non-visualized data for insights that help in decision-making
- 15%
- 15%
- 19%
- 14%

We receive updates on trends that are completed manually and are provided on an infrequent basis (i.e., once a month or less often) or are very limited
- 16%
- 12%
- 10%
- 16%

We struggle to use data for decision-making beyond the most basic data trends like enrollment and retention
- 15%
- 23%
- 18%
- 13%

Our data is siloed and it is challenging to glean insights from it for decision-making
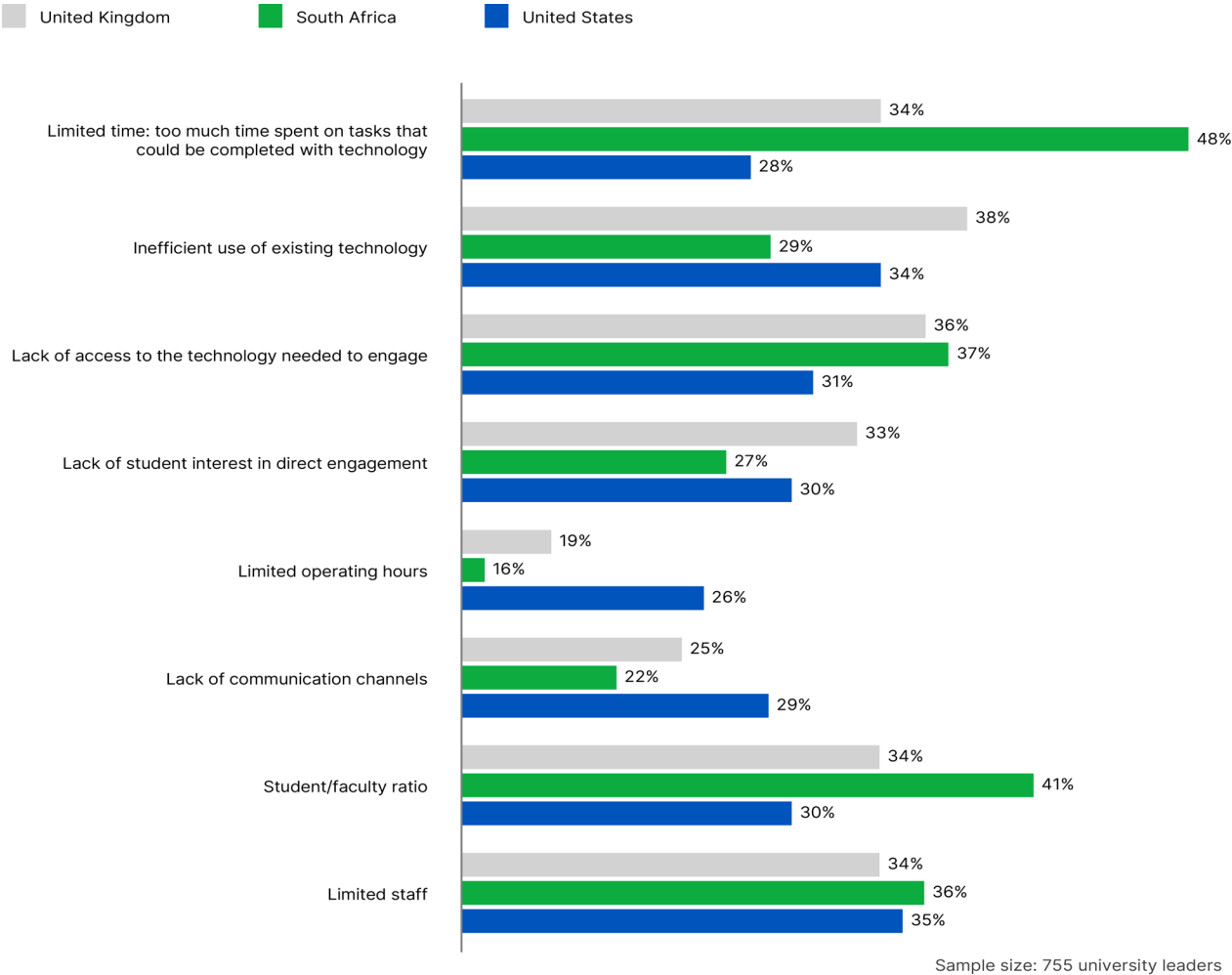- 10%
- 15%
- 16%
- 12%

Sample size: 2,617 university leaders

Barriers to Student Engagement

Surveyed university leaders also identified barriers preventing more direct engagement with students. At the top of the list was limited staff, identified by nearly four in 10 leaders, along with a lack of access to engaging technology. At least one in three leaders also pointed to inefficient use of existing technology, the student/faculty ratio, and time constraints due to efforts spent on tasks that could instead be handled by technology.

There are regional differences in regard to the biggest barriers to engaging with students. While university leaders in South Africa are mostly pressed for time due to technological inefficiencies, leaders in the United States indicate limited staff as the top barriers. It is interesting to note that university leaders in the United Kingdom reported a lack of student interest in direct engagement as a prominent barrier, differing from other surveyed countries.

What are the barriers preventing more direct engagement with students?
Please select all that apply. (By country)

Legend: United Kingdom (grey), South Africa (green), United States (blue)

Barrier	United Kingdom	South Africa	United States
Limited time: too much time spent on tasks that could be completed with technology	34%	48%	28%
Inefficient use of existing technology	38%	29%	34%
Lack of access to the technology needed to engage	36%	37%	31%
Lack of student interest in direct engagement	33%	27%	30%
Limited operating hours	19%	16%	26%
Lack of communication channels	25%	22%	29%
Student/faculty ratio	34%	41%	30%
Limited staff	34%	36%	35%

Sample size: 755 university leaders
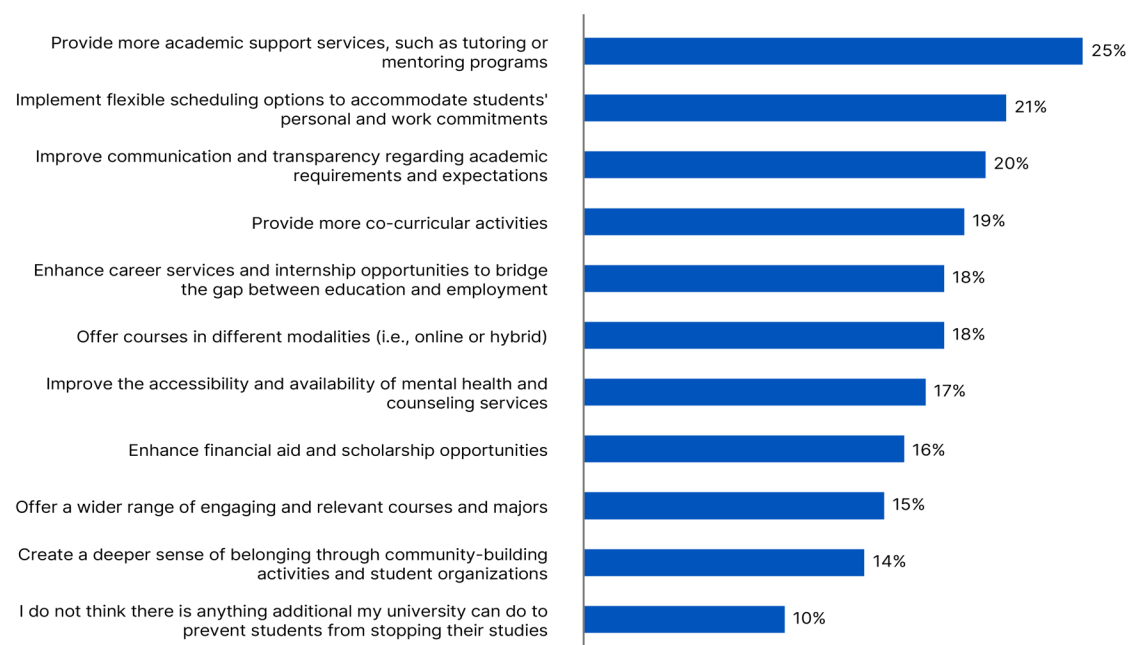
Course Modality Makes a Difference

It is clearly demonstrated that the modality in which courses are offered impacts student experience, retention, and completion rates. Following the pandemic, universities have generally returned to face-to-face courses, but may also be maintaining a higher percentage of online courses than they did previously. According to the survey results, the highest percentage of students prefer face-to-face courses, at four in 10, followed by one in three who prefer courses in either a blended (mostly face-to-face, some online elements) or a hybrid (mix of face-to-face and online courses) format. The lowest percentage, at 25%, prefer fully online courses.

Regional variation was also observed, as students in North America and the Middle East, for example, preferred fully online courses, while students in Europe and Latin America expressed a strong preference for face-to-face courses. University leaders indicated that their course offerings were generally in line with student expectations, with 44% identifying that the majority of courses were offered in a face-to-face format. This was followed by 31% who indicated the majority are offered in either a blended or hybrid format, and 25% offering the majority of courses fully online.

Student Challenges and Opportunities for Support

Data showed students face a variety of challenges during their university life. A staggering 95% of respondents identified at least one significant challenge they faced during the last term. By being aware of these challenges, university leadership can better identify opportunities to support students and, in so doing, help more students see their studies through to completion.

What do you believe are the most important actions your university can take to help students stay enrolled and complete their degrees? Please select up to 3 responses.

Response	Percentage
Provide more academic support services, such as tutoring or mentoring programs	25%
Implement flexible scheduling options to accommodate students' personal and work commitments	21%
Improve communication and transparency regarding academic requirements and expectations	20%
Provide more co-curricular activities	19%
Enhance career services and internship opportunities to bridge the gap between education and employment	18%
Offer courses in different modalities (i.e., online or hybrid)	18%
Improve the accessibility and availability of mental health and counseling services	17%
Enhance financial aid and scholarship opportunities	16%
Offer a wider range of engaging and relevant courses and majors	15%
Create a deeper sense of belonging through community-building activities and student organizations	14%
I do not think there is anything additional my university can do to prevent students from stopping their studies	10%

Sample size: 2,617 university leaders

An overwhelming majority of university leaders (90%) felt that there was at least one thing their institution could do to impact the likelihood of students staying enrolled and completing their degree. When asked to identify what they thought was most achievable, one in four identified opportunities to provide more academic support services, with one in five pointing to flexible scheduling options to accommodate students' extracurricular commitments. To support this, students agreed with a need for more academic support services (52%), but also suggested improvements to the availability and accessibility of mental health counseling (29%), as well as enhancing career services and internship opportunities (29%). One in four students also showed interest in a wider range of courses. The disparity between student and leaders' perspectives presents an opportunity to review the infrastructure of career services and increase counseling availability.

Of particular significance, 76% of students expect their university to assist them in finding a job after graduation. While most leaders report having information on career pathways that would assist students post-graduation, only 47% make it readily available to students or advisors, and fewer still to both groups (35%). There is an opportunity here to provide this information on a global level, encouraging deeper student-advisor connections and meeting student expectations in relation to career guidance and support.

While addressing the challenges students face is crucial, university leaders were also asked to reflect on the most pressing issues universities are facing today. At the top of the list was rising tuition fees and student debt (22%); followed by a limited focus on practical, real-world experience (19%); retaining quality faculty and staff (18%); maintaining academic standards and quality (18%); and the politicization of higher education (18%). Data did, however, suggest notable regional differences. Rising tuition fees and student debt, for example, was mentioned primarily in North America, the United Kingdom, Saudi Arabia, and South Africa. The retention of quality faculty and staff retention was particularly noted in Asia-Pacific, and the politicization of higher education was most commonly cited in the United States, Mexico, and Spain, making it among the highest differentiation by region. These differences in regional priorities and challenges might suggest that rather than seeking a one-size-fits-all solution, taking a more personalized approach in addressing these issues at either a regional or state level would be far more beneficial.

Looking Beyond

While employing technology does have its benefits, its implementation may only be half the story. Perhaps it is the integration of technology that is key to leveraging the benefits modern advancements have to offer.

Anthology's vision for a connected ecosystem of products and services uses data to power meaningful interactions both in and out of the classroom. Integrating data silos and combining insights across critical systems facilitates more relevant engagement between staff, faculty, and learners. By delivering real-time insights to assist educators and administrators in providing better services to students, learners receive the right information, at the right time, to make better decisions when it matters most.

Methodology

Data collection was conducted online among university leaders and students across 11 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 utilized 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 delivers education and technology solutions so that students can reach their full potential and learning institutions thrive. Millions of students around the world are supported throughout their education journey via Anthology's ecosystem of flagship SaaS solutions and supporting services, including the award-winning Blackboard® (LMS), Anthology® Student (SIS/ERP), and Anthology® Reach (CRM). Through the Power of Together, we are uniquely inspiring educators and institutions with innovation that is meaningful, simple, and intelligent to help customers redefine what's possible and create life-changing opportunities for people everywhere.

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