

# The Students' Perspective: Valuable Insights for University Leaders

Motivations, preferences, and needs of today's students

GLOBAL  
EDITION



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Understanding the evolving needs, preferences, and expectations of students in higher education 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 greater 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 11 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.

This report focuses on the results of the global survey to identify relevant opportunities to enhance the student experience and further support students' success.

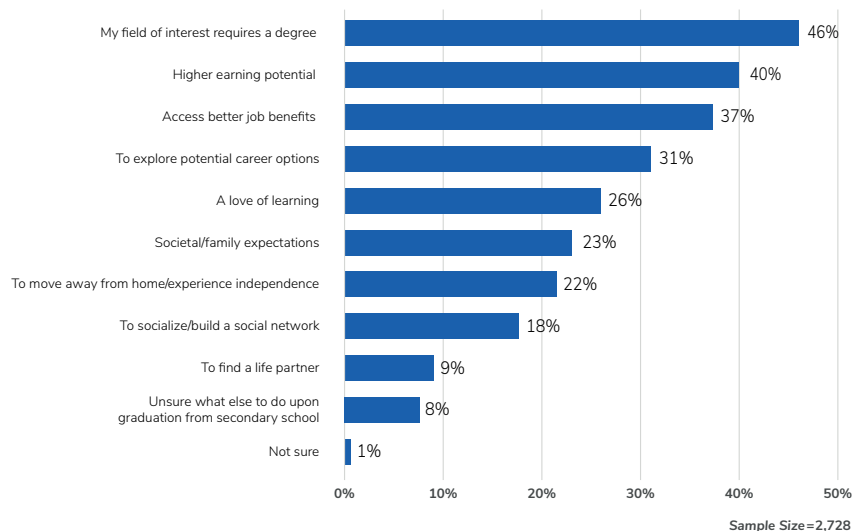
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# Student Motivations: From Enrolling to the Push for Completion and the Challenges in Between

Students have different reasons for enrolling in a university and for completing their degree. Universities can continue to refine student support in efforts to improve retention and graduation rates and enhance recruitment efforts. A deeper understanding of students' reasons for enrolling and those that impact completion can help universities adjust communications to future prospective students, as well as provide additional services to ensure that students successfully complete their studies.

## Motivations for Enrolling

*What were your primary motivations for enrolling at your current university?*



The primary reasons for enrolling at a university are generally more practical in nature, led by the field of interest requiring a degree and followed by the higher earning potential gained from having a degree. At least one of these reasons was selected by more than seven in 10 respondents. These were closely followed by being able to access better job benefits, as noted in the above chart. However, there are also other key reasons, including exploring potential careers, which was identified by three in 10 students, as well as for a love of learning for about one in four respondents. While this indicates that the primary reasons are often related to the tangible benefits of getting a degree, there is a subset of the student population that also sees university as an opportunity to explore options, whether that is related to learning or to career options.

First-generation students, that is, students who are the first in their immediate family to attend university, were less focused on higher earning potential or accessing better job benefits than continuing-generation students at a statistically significant level. On the other hand, they expressed a higher motivation for moving away from home and experiencing independence, with one in four first-generation students citing that as a primary motivation, as well as a love of learning. In addition, finding a life partner was a primary motivation for 11% of first-generation students, compared to six percent of continuing-generation students. Therefore, while overall motivations between these two groups are similar, there are some differences, which may be helpful if targeting recruitment efforts to first-generation students.

There were differences by country as well, with students in South Africa, Australia, and the Philippines being the most likely to indicate that their field of interest required a degree, while students in Singapore and the United States had the highest percentage of those selecting higher earning potential as a primary motivator, while social and family expectations were strong motivators in Singapore, Saudi Arabia, and the Philippines. The United Kingdom had a much higher percentage of respondents indicating that they were unsure what else to do upon graduation from secondary school, with one in four respondents selecting this as a primary motivation. These variations by country may be helpful in developing a deeper understanding of regional motivations.

Universities should look for ways to highlight the return on education as it relates to higher incomes and better benefits, given that these are the primary motivations of a high percentage of students. Including some of this messaging for prospective students may help to deepen their connection to the university and increase their likelihood of applying and attending.

### **Motivations for completing a degree**

Current students are primarily driven to complete their degree due to the potential of earning a higher income (50%), having broader employment opportunities (34%), and gaining a professional position in their area of interest (30%), followed by gaining life-long skills (29%) or supporting their family (29%). Overall, as seen with the motivation to enroll, a large majority of students are motivated to complete their degree because of the direct benefits to be gained from earning the degree.

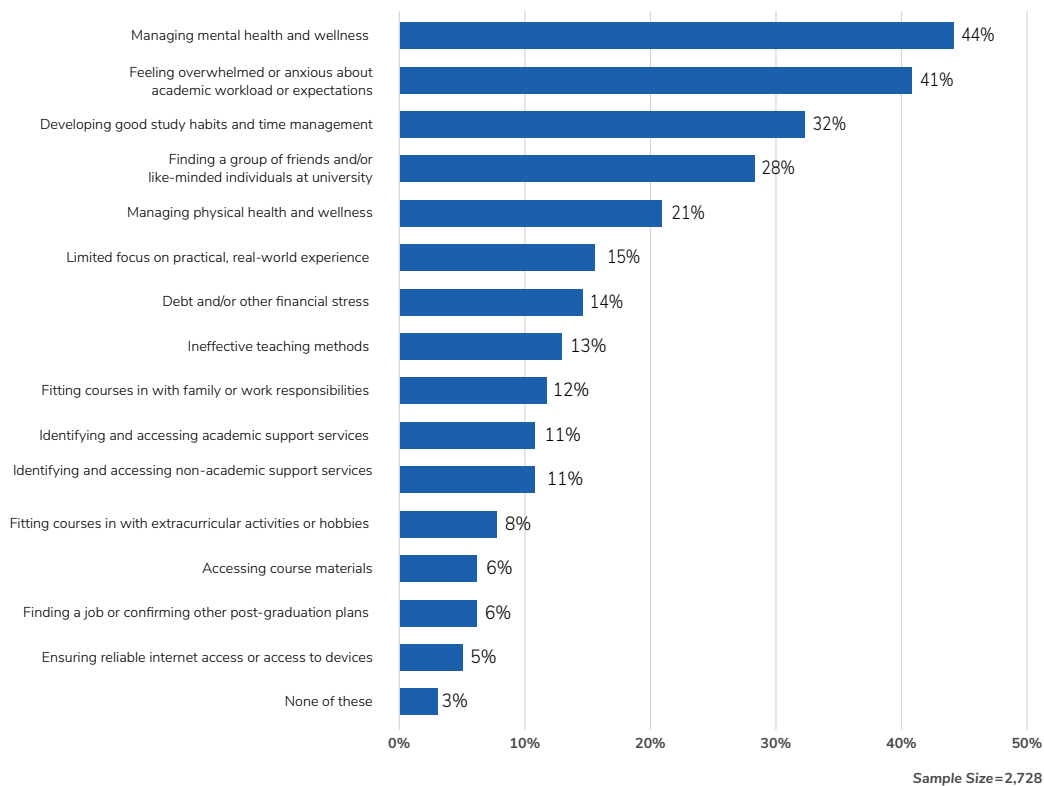
Regionally, earning a higher income was most important in North America, Asia-Pacific, the Middle East and Africa, and Europe, while the highest number of students in Latin America saw a benefit in broader employment opportunities, followed by those in Asia-Pacific. On the other hand, building lifelong skills was of higher importance in Europe, as well as North America and the Middle East and Africa, compared to the other countries. For students in Europe, completing their degree because of a commitment to finishing what they started was notably higher than in other regions with nearly three in 10 students citing that as a reason for completion.

Overall, these primary motivations further support using outcomes-based information in communication with prospective students and in highlighting this type of content on the university's website, with a focus on earning potential, broader employment opportunities, and preparation for a career.

### **Students Continue to Face Challenges**

Students face a variety of challenges during their university career. By being aware of these challenges, university leadership will be better able to identify opportunities to support students and, in so doing, help more students continue their studies and complete their degree. Ninety-five percent of respondents identified at least one significant challenge they faced during the last term.

## What were the most pressing challenges for you at university this past term?



The highest percentage of students—nearly one of every two—reported one of the most pressing challenges was managing their mental health and wellness. In addition, nearly the same percentage indicated that feeling overwhelmed or anxious about academic workload or expectations was a key challenge. Between the two, 65% of students selected one of those as a most pressing challenge for them this past term. 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 additional ways to support them.

Additionally, about one in three students mentioned needing to develop good study habits and time management, while more than one in four identified the challenge of finding a group of friends and/or likeminded individuals at their university. These are additional stressors that impact a 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 in turn impacts their likelihood of remaining at university (Strayhorn, 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 in a virtual setting.

Managing physical health and wellness was mentioned by over one in five students, highlighting opportunities to support students in their physical and mental health. And while more of the cost of education is being placed on students in much of the world, this was only highlighted by about one in seven respondents, although over one in five students in North America identified it as a concern.

There are clear actions that universities should consider based on this data. Prioritizing 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 ensuring that they are able to access these services, is critical. Additionally, universities should consider ways to reduce the anxiety or pressure from academic expectations by considering how they can ensure students feel prepared rather than overwhelmed.

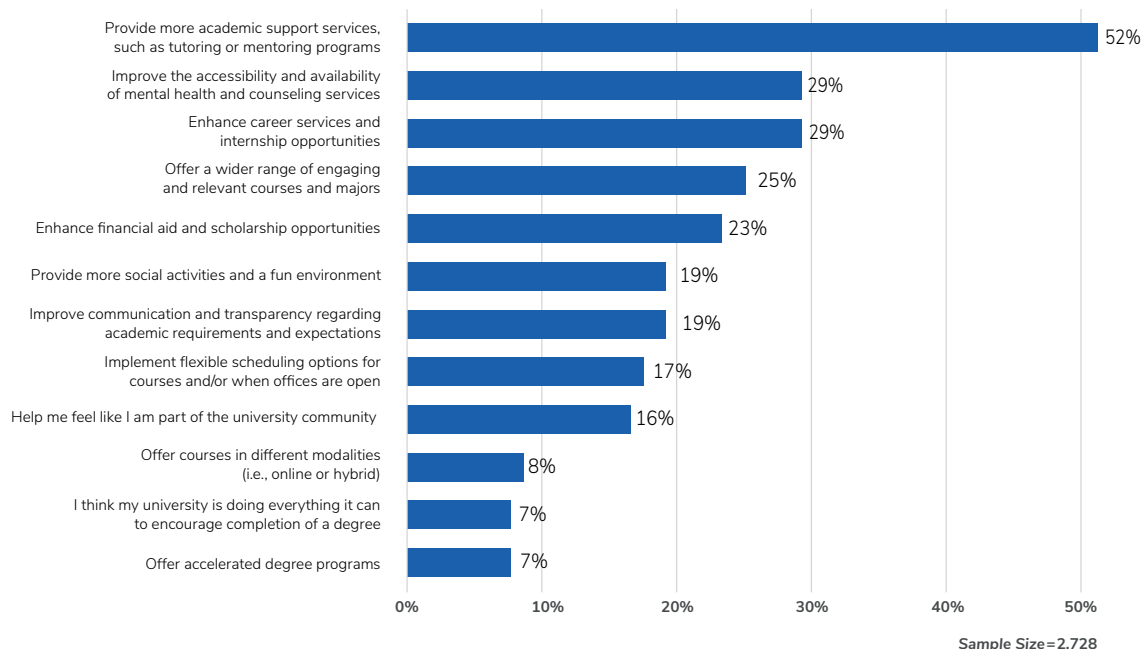
Regionally, there was general alignment on the most pressing challenges, although some differences to note. For example, managing mental health and wellness was a much higher concern among students in Europe and Asia-Pacific, mentioned by nearly five in 10 students, while for other regions, it was closer to four in 10 students. There were similar differences among students who felt overwhelmed or anxious about academic workload or expectations, with students in Asia-Pacific, the Middle East and Africa, and North America being most likely to identify that as a pressing challenge. Students in Asia-Pacific were also most concerned about developing good study habits and time management, while this was lowest among students in North America.

Facing significant challenges while at university can impact students’ academic success as well as their happiness and sense of wellbeing, which have all been linked to likelihood of retention (O’Keefe, 2013; Strayhorn, 2018). Any steps universities can take to address some of these identified challenges will help students feel more connected and comfortable, thus improving the student experience.

## Opportunities for Universities: The Student Perspective

Given the challenges that they identified, students were asked to share how their university could help them and their classmates complete their degrees.

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



Over one in two students identified expanding academic support services, including tutoring and mentoring programs, as a key option for universities. This was followed by about three in 10 students identifying opportunities to improve the accessibility and availability of mental health and counseling services; as well as a similar number pointing to an opportunity to enhance career services and internship opportunities. Following that, one in four students felt that offering a wider range of relevant courses and majors would help fellow students complete their degree, followed closely by enhancing financial aid and scholarship opportunities.

As in other areas, there was often relative alignment across regions with some notable differences. Students in all regions except North America identified the need for more academic support services as the greatest opportunity, while this was second—at a notably lower percentage—among North American students. Enhancing career services and internship opportunities was of second highest importance among students in Asia-Pacific and in the Middle East and Africa, while improving the accessibility of mental health and counseling services was cited by the second highest number of respondents in Latin America and in Europe. North American students saw the greatest opportunity in offering a wider range of engaging and relevant courses and majors, while this was less important in other regions. The greatest difference between first-generation students and continuing-generation students came from nearly six in 10 first-generation students identifying a need for providing more academic support services, compared to about five in 10 continuing-generation students.

In perhaps surprising data, the highest percentage of students prefer face-to-face courses at 40%, followed by 33% who prefer courses in a blended or hybrid format, while only one in four prefer online courses, whether offered asynchronously or synchronously. While not a clear indication of a preference for online courses, a high percentage of students are looking for at least some aspects of a course to be offered online, which universities should consider. There was significant variation regionally with students in Europe and Latin America having a higher preference for face-to-face courses at nearly one in two respondents, while only about one in three respondents in North America and in the Middle East and Africa indicated a preference for face-to-face courses. These were also the regions with the highest interest in fully online courses. Given these regional differences, university leaders should continue to make adjustments to course offerings and broaden the modalities being offered, while keeping in mind the general sentiment of students in their region or even at their university.

Overall, this section highlights ways that universities can continue to adjust their approach to student support, whether through additional services to support students, or by offering courses in a modality of interest to students. Universities should review available academic support services and ensure that students are aware of existing services and also determine whether new services could be offered to assist students.

# Opportunities to Improve the Student Experience with Technology

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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—over seven in 10 students strongly agreed or agreed with the statement that there are too many systems to use. This was highest in the Middle East and Africa, followed by Latin America and Asia-Pacific, but even in North America, over one in two students indicated this. This presents an opportunity for university leaders to identify efficiencies in systems, and in doing so, also get better access to student data (87% of university leaders agree that a holistic view of a student would benefit their team and their students, while only 47% have this type of data available). Reducing systems would also have a positive impact on the student experience, providing a more seamless technology experience for students.

One area where there has already been progress is that most students (86%) report having access to a self-service portal where they can view academic progress to see if they are on track. However, about one in three feel that while the information is provided, it is not easy to consume. For the just over one in 10 students who do not have this type of information readily available, it is critical for universities to invest in technology to help inform students of their progress (note that 12% of university leaders also indicated that their university did not have technology in place for this).

Overall, students are looking for more support and guidance in a world where they are increasingly communicated with. One of the key opportunities is through more personalized information from their university. The large majority of students would find the following types of information very or somewhat helpful to receive:

- Reminders about upcoming deadlines such as course registrations, etc. (92%)
- Recommendations for courses to take based on their major (91%)
- Recommendations for courses to take based on career goals (89%)
- Reminders about assignments due in class (88%)
- Information about upcoming student organization events (86%)
- Recommendations for courses to take based on prior grades (82%)

Every option for this type of information that was presented to respondents appears to be highly valued. Therefore, the more universities can do to provide students with this type of information, the more likely students will feel supported and remain enrolled.



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 (virtual learning environments) 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 with 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.

In addition, students want to have course content available to them in a variety of ways. Seventy-six percent of students point to having the ability to listen to or read course content to be helpful, while seven in 10 indicated that being able to read content from the learning management system on their mobile device would be extremely or very helpful. Moreover, 69% felt that being able to translate content into their native language 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.

Overall, these are areas that present opportunities to universities to increase their use of data and technology to deliver more detailed recommendations more efficiently. This information does not take the place of advisor meetings, but by providing insights for students, such as recommended courses, that can be accessed at any time, conversations during meetings can be more focused and productive.

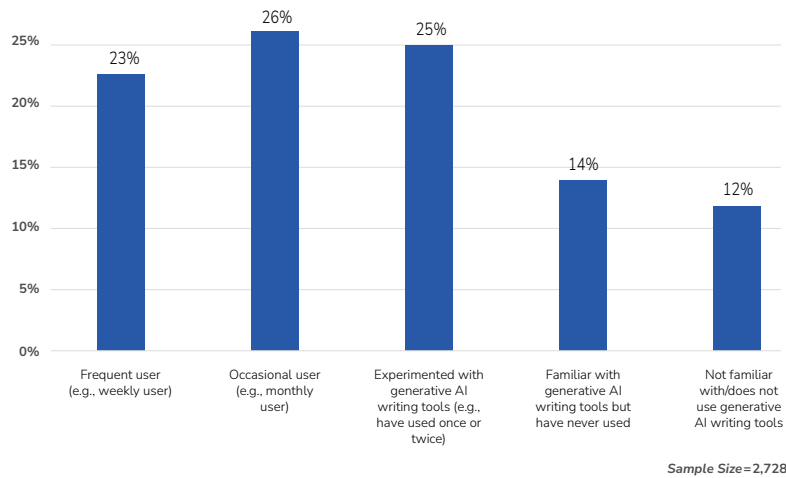
In considering how best to communicate with students, they continue to prefer email as the primary way to hear from the university, with 49% indicating that more personalized communications with relevant information are preferred as one of two favored methods of communication, followed by 41% who identified general broadcast emails as a preferred way to receive information. However, unlike in other regions, students in North America are much less likely to respond to general broadcast emails, with only 27% listing that as one of two preferred ways—the lowest of any region surveyed. Text messaging was third highest at just over one in five students, followed closely by messaging through a social media app (highest among students in Asia-Pacific). These insights can be helpful as universities consider how best to reach students.

## Students and Artificial Intelligence

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Students globally are already actively using generative AI tools; 23% consider themselves frequent users (at least weekly) of generative AI, while an additional 26% report being at least monthly users. Moreover, 25% of the remaining respondents have used these tools once or twice. Therefore, nearly three out of four students have at least experimented with AI tools, or are using them more frequently. In addition, 71% of respondents indicated that their use of generative AI is going to increase somewhat or significantly in the next six months. This means that universities have to recognize the use of generative AI tools among students and the opportunity and responsibility associated with it. Overall, it seems that universities are developing policies on the use of AI—two-thirds of respondents indicate being familiar with their university's guidelines for AI usage. Even with this relatively high percentage, universities should continue to inform students about their AI policies and identify opportunities to teach them about the appropriate use of AI, including generative AI.

## University Students' Use of Generative AI Tools

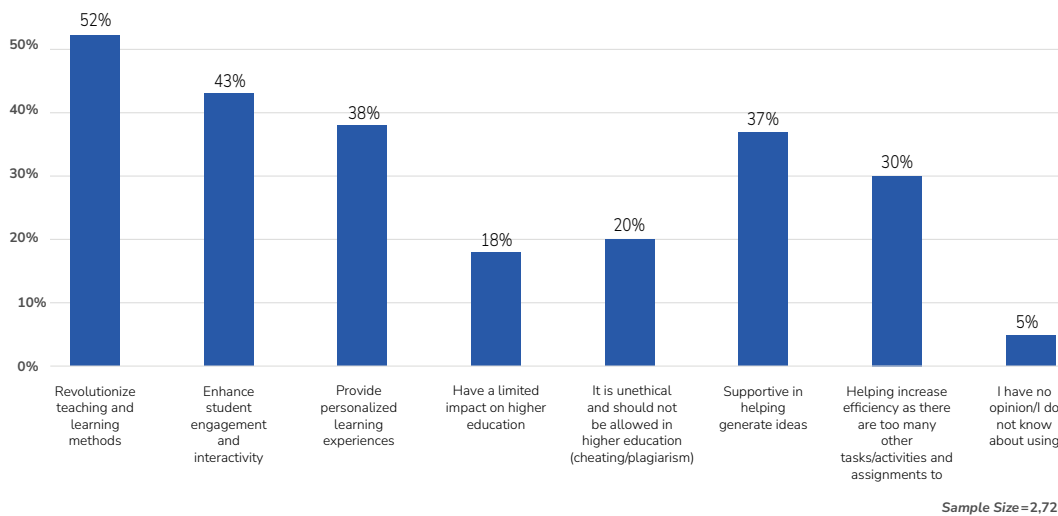


Regionally, there is some variation in AI usage among students, with students in Latin America indicating the highest use (57% are frequent or occasional users), followed by those in the Middle East and Africa (51% are frequent or occasional users), while students in North America and Europe are less likely to be frequent or occasional users of generative AI (38% in North America and 40% in Europe). However, 59% of students in Europe and 54% in North America indicated that their use will increase in the next six months. That, however, compares to 84% in Latin America, 76% in the Middle East and Africa, and 73% in Asia-Pacific.

## Students' View of Role of AI in Higher Education

When asked about opportunities related to AI and its potential role in higher education, students generally appear excited about the opportunities that AI and generative AI will bring.

### Student Perspective: What role do you think artificial intelligence (AI) will play in higher education?



In fact, over one in two students globally indicated that they feel AI will revolutionize teaching and learning methods, followed by over four in 10 who see AI enhancing student engagement and interactivity, followed by nearly four in 10 students who feel that it will provide personalized learning experiences. Furthermore, subsets of students also said they

feel it will be supportive in helping generate ideas (37%) and help increase efficiency with tasks and activities (30%). At the same time, one in five students feel that generative AI specifically is unethical and should not be allowed in higher education, while nearly the same number feel that AI will only have a limited impact on higher education. Overall, however, students are generally positive about the impact AI will have on their student experience, whether it relates to the level of engagement, the teaching style, or as a means to get assistance.

While it is to be expected that students more quickly adopt new technology, including generative AI, in this case, it is especially important that university leaders and faculty members familiarize themselves with this technology, as it presents opportunities to adjust the approach to teaching and improve the student experience.

## Methodology

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Data collection was conducted online among students and university leaders 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, 2,728 students and 2,617 university leaders qualified for and completed the survey.

## About Anthology

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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.

**[www.anthology.com](http://www.anthology.com)**.

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