5 tip guide to using student experience to increase retention rates
Students who fail to graduate are costly to universities, colleges and training providers. While the UK leads the way in higher education with a retention rate of 71% compared to 49% in the US and 31% in Australia*, a lot of students are still falling through the cracks. There is a range of issues that come into play in failing to complete an education program including:

- Financial difficulties
- Course availability
- Lack of counselling support
- Lack of student engagement

Introduction

How can improving the student experience boost retention rates?

Universities and colleges are under increasing pressure to improve student retention, and raising this rate is a huge undertaking. Whether it’s something as simple as making course offerings clearer or something more complex, like interacting more often and more meaningfully with students. Institutions know that it is up to them to provide the information and engagement necessary to garner and keep a student’s interest. In this digital age, the landscape of tertiary education and the learning experience is shifting dramatically.

There are now a vast array of tools for increased communication in order to assist in engagement and information providing tasks.

There are multiple offerings to help students feel like they are a part of a university or college community and that they can ask for and receive help easily. It is well documented that communicating early and often with advisors and faculty is key to retaining students.

To ensure that more students leave an institution with the credentials they came for, education providers must focus on improving the student experience. Student retention is not a one-time thing, it’s about keeping the students engaged throughout their entire course through to graduation.

This 5 tip guide looks at how education establishments can provide a better experience in order to attract and retain students.
Enable connections through online communities

Social media has become an integral part of all of our lives. We use it to connect with friends and family, to catch up on current events, and, perhaps most importantly, to entertain ourselves. An increasing number of channels are connecting more and more individuals across a vast landscape. Niche interest groups on sites like Facebook allow like-minded people to come together and discuss the issues that matter most to them. In university and college, these platforms also enable students to form close ties outside of the classroom.

Not all students learn the same way, and so providing access to online forums ensures students learn at their own pace, collaborate successfully on group projects and hold in-depth discussions on specialist course topics. Fostering a strong community spirit both on and off campus can give a student a sense of belonging, allowing education providers to reach out to students before they even start their course.

Connecting with students is important and colleges and universities should strive to build their brand on social media too. Using features such as videos, student experience stories can be shared and upcoming events can be promoted to build engagement and as a result, retention.
Request feedback and act on it

Student feedback is a core component for any college or university and can be very powerful if done well. Through student surveys education providers give the students a voice, enabling them to provide their colleges and universities with feedback on the course and teaching environment.

It’s easy to ask students directly what they think through online surveys while also utilising social media polls and blogs to open up opportunities to find out where students want more information or what areas are giving cause for concern.

This gives an institution valuable insights and external verification on what is working and what needs to be changed to improve the student experience. In effect, students can become co-creators of their own learning environment. The key is to implement suggestions that may work and let students know you are trialling it.

Student feedback is very important and an educational institute must work hard to develop and maintain the following activities:

• Promoting the ethics of providing true feedback
• Highlighting the impact of student feedback on the institute and its community
• Developing policies to ensure that feedback is anonymous
• Publishing periodical reports that demonstrate the contribution of the students via their feedback

The power of feedback lies in a double-barrelled approach, addressing both cognitive and motivational factors at the same time. Good feedback gives students the information they need so they can understand where they are in their learning and what to do next—the cognitive factor. Once they feel they understand what to do and why, most students develop a feeling that they have control over their own learning—the motivational factor.
Attending college or university can be an expensive and time-consuming exercise whether there are tuition fees involved or not. This is a huge investment by students and comes with a desire to understand what happens at the end of the academic journey over and above graduation. With individuals relying more and more on peer reviews and endorsements, your alumni can help to raise awareness of the success of your institution amongst your students.

Students want to see potential, success and growth, both personally and professionally before making their investment and graduates who have gone on to enjoy great success are the most valuable brand ambassadors a college or university could ask for. By enabling current students to chat with alumni, ask questions and learn from their successes, educational institutions will be able to demonstrate that their courses and teaching systems are successful. Mentorship programs have proven to boost student retention rates and keep alumni engaged.

Engaging with alumni can offer assistance to staff in addition to students. Alumni can help to improve the quality of teaching by sharing their real life feedback with leadership. Additionally, they can provide case study materials and give guest lectures to bring real life experiences into the classrooms.
4

Analyse student activity

Tracking and measuring student activities will allow you to identify the early warning indicators in a student's performance or behaviour. This will allow you to take proactive steps towards assisting any individual or group.

Before dropping out, students typically show signs of disengagement or disenchantment and this can accelerate quickly from missed classes to late submissions before running into much bigger difficulties. It isn't easy to keep track of every aspect of a student's performance but digital advancements mean the tools are there to provide faculty members with the assistance needed for such tasks. This lets colleges and universities provide personal support to students who may be struggling and the impact can be significant.

Every time a student interacts with their university – be that going to the library, logging into their virtual learning environment or submitting assessments online – they leave behind a digital footprint. The measurement, collection, analysis and reporting of this data can help to identify at-risk students.

Once an at-risk student has been identified, personalised interventions such as advice or support from a tutor can then be taken to help to try to retain those students.

Some examples of interventions include student-facing dashboards which contain tools that show the student's progress relative to their own goals or to the rest of the cohort. This is found to motivate students and there are many documented examples of practices resulting in a decrease in attrition rate and a reduction in the number of lower grades attained.
The rise of smartphones and devices provides universities and colleges the ideal platform to connect with students, increase engagement and boost student retention. Offering digital channels to assist, inform and engage students allows educational institutions to make significant progress towards creating a better student experience. Introducing student-centric apps to guide and advise on all aspects of campus life can allow an education provider to offer much more than just academic support.

Pushing the right messages or services to a student when flagged up as showing warning signals is a certain way to ensure you continue to connect with each student, and in a personalised way.

It is hard to ignore the growing problem of student mental health and considering the well-being of the students, education providers may improve student retention by developing their counselling service. Beyond that, colleges and universities should look to create a learning environment that encourages entrepreneurship. Soft skills like networking and negotiation offered through career centres or workshops are becoming increasingly important to success in the digital age.
Conclusion

Helping students learn to navigate their new environment and its complexities and giving the necessary focused assistance within the first year of study ensures you make a strong connection with that student. If a student is going to struggle, it is likely to be within their first year of college, before they have fully integrated the demands of a college or university education. Continuing to build on that relationship and rolling out the behaviours of successful students to the entire student body is then key to increasing retention.

When students start to have doubts about their course or institution, they can feel isolated and alone. They might not see the help available and feel disconnected from anyone who can help them. This is a major issue in falling student retention rates.

To counter the problem, universities and colleges must look to connect on a more personalised level, through a range of initiatives and utilising the digital tools that are familiar to today’s students. Considering all the students at your institution and looking at ways to help their progression to graduation, using all the resources and tools available will undoubtedly improve the student experience and in turn improve retention.

Prioritising the experience of students not only ensures they graduate but encourages an engaged and active student base that become energised advocates and alumni.

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If you would like to talk to one of our advisors today about any of the information included in this guide or how myday can instantly boost your open day experience, and then continue to deliver the rich experience you aspire to achieve then please call 0845 050 7380 or email info@collabco.com