



The rise in student dissatisfaction

"We show our students we're listening to them by asking their lecturers to read out their own feedback from our student course experience surveys. The video gets around 5000 hits and it's being watched from start to finish."

Mark Glynn, Head of the Teaching Enhancement Unit at Dublin City University.

A Collabco White Paper

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“You can divide universities into recruiter universities and selective universities – we already get ten to fifteen applications per place, so we don’t have to be at the forefront of any of this stuff (sic) to affect admissions. There is no real incentive internally to try new things, because there’s no need to.”

An academic at one of the UK’s Russell Group collegiate universities talking about digitisation.

For centuries, our universities have competed on a playing field of reputation. Those with the best reputation have been in the enviable position of being able to cherry pick the best students from the queues of willing applicants at their doors. But with the introduction of tuition fees and the digital demands of Generation Y, things are changing and even those universities with the best reputations must sit up and take notice of the shifting sands. Student dissatisfaction in their overall university experience will be the unpicking of many a well-made reputation.

Since the introduction of tuition fees in UK higher education and a rise in them to a cap of £9,000, there has been increasing pressure to deliver a high level of education – one that is value for money. According to the Sutton Trust, a think-tank to improve social mobility through education, students in England leave university with more debt than anywhere else in the English-speaking world, so education must pay dividends to make it worthwhile. However, the rise in fees has not necessarily provided a better quality of teaching for students, leading to increasing student dissatisfaction year on year. The Student Academic Experience Survey in 2014 revealed that 33.1% of those studying at institutions in England felt their course was poor or very poor value for money. This figure was just 18.3% in 2012, meaning that student dissatisfaction has nearly doubled since fees increased to £9000. [Higher Education Policy Institute 2014 Student Academic Experience Survey]. It’s a worrying trend for institutions and creates considerable challenges in order to meet growing student expectations. lity, cloud and social media. [IDC predictions 2015]

According to UKCISA (UK Council for International Student Affairs), 436,585 foreign students joined HE institutions in the UK in the 2014-15 academic year. Of those non-EU students, the majority were Chinese. Other top ranking countries include India, Malaysia, USA and Hong Kong – all technologically advanced nations with high expectations of the use of technology in their daily lives as well as in their learning.

Compounding that, in 2015 around 400,000 Generation Y students entered higher education in the UK – students that have never known a world that worked any other way than digitally. They are the technically savvy generation that expects to do everything at the touch of a button or the swipe of a screen. Following behind, Generation Z wants information instantly and prefers to order, transact and get a

response without speaking to anyone or physically touching any paper. They are no longer the students of the future, but the students of today, and institutions that ignore the way that they prefer to work, do so at their peril. Traditional universities that don’t see a reason to change because they enjoy the benefits of a strong academic reputation, will be out of step with the expectations of their students and risk losing them to the new world that is emerging.

Forces for change: Student engagement and retention

“Holistic engagement via digital channels is a must for the modern university. Students expect to connect with everyone from admissions officers to alumni representatives. Having a strategic engagement plan in place will help drive delivery of consistent communications and content throughout an institution.”

[Eric Stoller, higher education strategic communications consultant & blogger at InsideHigherEd.com].

Student engagement is a major force for digital change in higher education. Attracting the best students is one thing, keeping them engaged until they successfully graduate and beyond is another thing entirely. Technology helps to reduce student attrition rates by reducing the isolation that some students feel when studying independently, creating a social aspect to learning and simply making life easier.

Smartphones and tablet computers enable students to remain engaged with each other as well as with teaching staff. They help to reduce ‘friction tasks’ – everything students must do in order to learn – such as visit the library and buy books, top up credit for university services or simply find a bus timetable. Students can get academic help from colleagues on their course, access university clubs or groups on campus, share photos and videos with friends socially, access financial aid information where relevant, and download their schedules, getting updates if lecture times change or rooms alter. Technology makes life easier, which in turn allows them to enjoy and engage in their learning more easily. Student anxiety is reduced as they have the ability to get real-time feedback and information directly to their device keeping them informed and their studies on track. Even those students who have been unable to attend class or are not able to live on campus can remain engaged digitally, driving further student retention.

Beyond an undergraduate's years on campus, technology also aids alumni relations by fostering a relationship with graduates long after they have entered the world of work. Having won students, it's advantageous for universities to keep them – they can be encouraged to return to higher degrees, offered continuing professional development in their fields and be persuaded to help undergraduates with work experience as well as recommending the institution to others whole heartedly.

Employability:

“Through the use of the right technology combined with learning analytics, softer skills can be measured in the work place and be used to develop individuals as well as provide employers with unprecedented insight into their future employees' potential. The ability to do the same in universities through use of technology sets the institutions adopting such an approach apart from their competition.”

[Professor Luke Dawson, director of undergraduate education, Liverpool Dental School.]

Universities have a job to do in terms of preparing learners for the world of work. Student satisfaction surveys affect university rankings and take into consideration not just course quality, but assessment, feedback and employability. Academic achievement is important, but the softer skills that students learn in higher education in terms of meeting deadlines, managing their workloads, interacting with colleagues and delivering a successful outcome are just as important for the world beyond education. Employers demand more than just a degree; they demand real-world skills that are delivered using real-world digital tools. Cloud computing, data analysis, mobility and social media are the four main drivers of global computing today and dominate every workplace. Universities must keep pace with these changes to remain relevant, especially since an increasing number of students are mature and have experience of the workplace already. Mature students who have often been in the workplace for years with exposure to the latest technologies have much greater expectations returning to higher education, and thus feel greater disappointment and frustration at a costly university 'experience' not in keeping with their working life.

Growing student expectations as well as increasing dissatisfaction represents an enormous challenge for universities of all reputations to overcome. Ironically, it's the more 'middle of the road' institutions that are ahead in terms of adapting to digital change as they see the need to adapt, the benefits that digitisation can bring to the university, but more importantly they understand that it's what students want, it's what draws them in, enables them and keeps them there. The student is the customer, an asset to nurture and cherish and is firmly in the driving seat.

Top down cultural change:

Change must come from the very top in order to create a unified digital culture right across a university. Social media, VLEs, the university website, email, apps, intranets and all other content must not exist in isolation but be accessible to all on any device in real-time. It requires clear vision for what the future of our universities looks like based upon the technology available, and

“Universities were founded on the premise of a place to gain access to new knowledge, thoughts, and ideas... they should fundamentally change from one of aiming to impart and assess knowledge, to one that enables an environment for knowledge evaluation, synthesis, and creative integration.”

Professor Luke Dawson, director of undergraduate education, Liverpool Dental School.

it will require significant resources to make those changes. Get it right, and your brand and well-earned reputation will benefit from the changes, and student dissatisfaction will soon become a thing of the past.

Providing students with a total learning experience satisfies learners on many levels and leaves those graduating with a lasting good impression. The admissions process is simply one touch point in the complete lifecycle of a student from recruitment through to alumni. No one is immune to change; even those institutions with the greatest resources and strongest brands must adapt, and digitisation represents the most radical area of change impacting modes of learning and accessibility to knowledge.

HE must take heed from countless examples in other sectors where failure to understand the impact digital change can have has resulted in catastrophe. Big retail brands have disappeared from the high street because they simply didn't react fast enough to digital change, and similarly, newspaper circulations have declined rapidly in the last decade. There are many parallels to be drawn from the relationship between readers and newspaper circulations, with universities and their students. Those newspapers that failed to understand that interactivity between title and reader mattered and provide a two-way conversation between the two, instead sticking with the more traditional one-way broadcast, were slow to digitise. By contrast, new media market entrants cultivated the two-way relationship with readers providing greater consumer choice and an ability to engage in real-time. This helped create the erosion of the 'traditional' media and a decline in readerships.

If universities refuse to recognise the same two-way interaction that the digital campus brings, they may suffer the same fate by continuing to foster student dissatisfaction.