SOLUTIONPATH

Introduction

A year since higher education made the transformational pivot to online teaching and learning and University leaders are reflecting on the impact of the pandemic on both their staff and student experience.

One of the key themes to emerge is the value of engagement. The need for students to feel connected, to interact and to feel supported has never been more important. In fact, the recent **OFS Gravity Assist report** recognised a sense of belonging as one of the most important factors in students' success and retention in Higher Education.

Maintaining a sense of belonging

It has been challenging for educators to maintain a sense of belonging in the current climate. During the pandemic, students have reported getting little feedback, a lack of support and even claim that their education experience represents poor value for money as a result.

University staff on the other hand have had difficulty with providing personalised support to their students at a distance, often not knowing if their students are engaged and who may be struggling.

Engagement insight is key

With most teaching and learning now taking place online, students are interacting with multiple digital touch points that provide a representation of active participation in their learning - student engagement.

It is this insight that has the potential to build a picture of engagement and disengagement at an individual, course or cohort level. Disengagement can then form the basis for informing who, when and how to target student support.

In this case study, we showcase three examples of how engagement analytics data and StREAM helped universities to target support and encourage engagement during the pandemic.

Engagement data supports an institutional approach to support

Teesside University completed an institutional roll out of engagement analytics in January 2020, as part of a larger digital transformation project to improve the student experience.

With this measure in place Teesside were not only able to monitor engagement but also track the impact of COVID-19 during the pandemic. These data insights were shared with tutors and support services across the institution in order to inform and initiate relevant student support.

With StREAM they are able to;

- Create a shared record of who is in self-isolation or who has deferred assessments
- Provide notifications to staff to check in on students returning from self-isolation
- Identify periods of low engagement to initiate interaction
- Activate a referral process for tutors to facilitate student access to specific support services

"StREAM was critical in our response to the COVID-19 pandemic"

Jonathan Eaton, Academic Registrar

Engagement data assists intervention to support student's well-being

UWE Bristol has expanded their wellbeing support to proactively reach out to students throughout the pandemic. They realise that not all their students require support however, COVID-19 has presented a significant risk to mental health issues and in particular to those who may not know how to actively seek help.

Tracking student's engagement with their online learning provided support service teams with real-time insight to help identify disengaged students and those who therefore gave the greatest cause for concern. Working with an evidence-based method of prioritisation staff could act quickly and avoid any student falling through the cracks.

The university has already activated thousands of calls and emails to students particularly at known pinch points in the academic year such as the Christmas break and plan to reach many more students by June 2021.

"We are relying far more than usual on making contact, reaching out, picking up the phone and having a conversation – because that's the most important thing for student's wellbeing"

Jo Midgley, Pro Vice Chancellor for Student Experience

NOTTINGHAM
TRENT UNIVERSITY

"Despite everything in the world right now, I wasn't forgotten about by my Uni"

NTU Student

Low engagement triggers action from students and staff

The NTU Student Dashboard makes engagement data available for both students and staff, with the view to allowing students to self-regulate their learning and to provide staff with insights about students so they can easily refer to professional services if required.

From the initial lockdown student engagement monitoring was used as the basis for outbound calling campaigns to offer support to students.

The Spring Campaign

Calls were made by a team of 30 volunteers and prioritised using average engagement over the last two weeks of Spring term.

5,700 phone calls were made
2,300 students were spoken to
780 referrals to Student Support Services or tutors
87% appreciated the call
16% stated that it led to changes in behaviour

NTU went on to run a Winter campaign which is currently being evaluated. You can learn more about NTU's pioneering work in Learning Analytics here - **Ofla Project**.

Looking ahead

Teaching and learning delivery is set to evolve into a hybrid model in the next academic year. As the physical and digital worlds blend it is likely we will also see more fragmentation, with additional digital resources in the mix and an increase in students from diverse backgrounds requiring more personalised learning and access to education.

To ensure a quality experience for all students in the years ahead will no doubt require a better understanding of how students are engaging in all aspects of their academic learning on and offline. To inform who, when and how to provide relevant support, ensure students feel connected to their institution and help each individual learner succeed.

'Access without support is not opportunity'
Vincent Tinto, 2008