EAB

Total Student Experience

A Holistic Approach to Addressing Today's Student Expectations

Student Experience:
Is Our Current Strategy Working?

Every university trumpets an improved student experience as a hallmark of its strategic plan for the next decade. This focus aligns well with the raison d'etre of higher education. A meaningful student experience is correlated with many markers of success both during a course of study and beyond: on-time degree completion, workplace preparation, emotional well-being, and more.

In an era of increased marketisation, attending to the student experience can also boost the institutional brand. Buttressed with improved league table rankings, positive results of regulatory surveys, and good word-of-mouth publicity, universities can craft a compelling message about value in the public square.
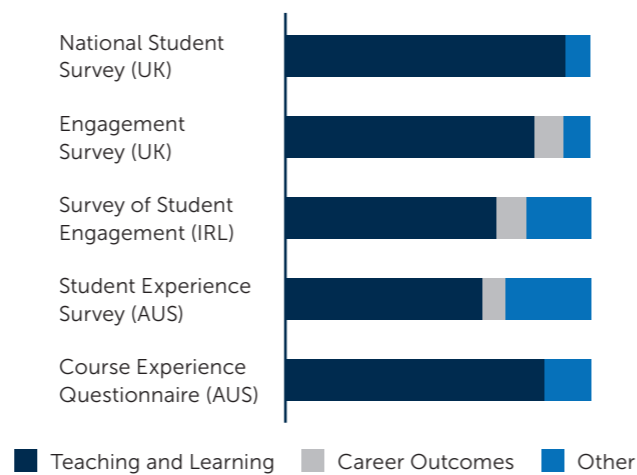
> 'Historically, we have scrambled to respond to poor performance on individual NSS questions. And still our overall satisfaction has declined. We're obsessed with the NSS—to the point of ignoring everything else. We have to think more holistically.'
>
> **Head of Student Experience**
> UK UNIVERSITY

Part of the problem is inherent to common student experience assessments: they are oriented around an antiquated view of the student experience, one focused overwhelmingly on teaching and learning, as well as career outcomes. And while universities cannot ease off their efforts in that realm, students are nonetheless bringing to campus a much broader set of expectations that influence their experience—and that leaders must be prepared to address.

Despite almost universal agreement on the importance of the student experience, there's a widespread feeling among higher education leaders that what has worked in the past will not be good enough for the future. Universities have fallen into a game of Whack-a-Mole, chasing after improved performance in a never-ending deluge of surveys.

Distribution of Focus in Major Student Experience Assessments

National Student Survey (UK)

Engagement Survey (UK)

Survey of Student Engagement (IRL)

Student Experience Survey (AUS)

Course Experience Questionnaire (AUS)

■ Teaching and Learning   ■ Career Outcomes   ■ Other

Embracing a Holistic Approach
to Student Experience

Given students' increasingly expansive expectations of their university experience, institutions need a new framework for organising and analysing their efforts. Too often, efforts to improve student experience take place in organisational silos. Improving the total student experience requires a holistic approach.

To that end, EAB has articulated six critical aspects of the student experience that institutions must take into account: enrolment, academic, administrative, well-being, social, and career. Elevating each of these areas is not meant to dilute or diminish the importance of teaching and learning or career preparation but instead to contextualise those activities alongside other aspects that influence the total student experience.

Six Aspects of the Total Student Experience

Enrolment
Marketing, recruitment, and prospective interactions that set 'customer' expectations before students arrive on campus

Administrative
Institutional processes, physical and digital estates, and systems that create the structure for delivering student support and fulfilling the teaching and learning mission

Social
Student clubs, athletics, student-to-student interactions, and relationships that contribute to student happiness and sense of belonging at the institution

Academic
Teaching and learning, assessment, and classroom activities that contribute to positive learning outcomes

Well-Being
Support staff, resources, and health services that attend to students' personal needs and general well-being across mental, physical, and financial dimensions

Career
Skill acquisition, employment partnerships, placements, and internships that support and prepare students for the workplace

Not an Either-Or Choice

This approach does not imply that national student experience survey results don't matter or that they shouldn't be monitored and managed. In fact, a strong focus on all dimensions of student experience will complement and support those efforts. Students will respond better to coordinated efforts to improve their holistic experience than they will to one-off solutions that address singular issues identified in a survey.

Emerging Expectations of Students in the New Decade

Expanded Mental Health and Physical Safety Infrastructure
'I struggle with anxiety—what kind of support can you offer me?'

Frictionless, Amazon-Like Consumer Experience
'It shouldn't be so difficult for me to register for next term's modules.'

Curated, Personalised Enrolment Pathway
'I want to feel like more than just another applicant.'

Intentional Physical and Social Environments
'What meaningful interactions can I have on campus?'

Diagnosing Your Approach to the Total Student Experience

Improving your university's total student experience must begin with an honest assessment of current performance. Since 2008, EAB has been working with nearly every type of higher education institution to improve student and institutional outcomes—leading to a wealth of experience and insight on this topic across an array of operational and demographic settings. Use the categories below to identify opportunities for improvement within your student experience strategy. Each cell is supported by research, diagnostic tools, and other resources from EAB's best practices library.

GRADING SCALE

1 = We are far behind and must devote significant resources to improve
2 = We are behind and need additional support to improve
3 = We are satisfied with our performance but can do better
4 = We are a sector leader in this area
N/A = Not applicable

Enrolment Experience

Personalised, Multichannel Prospect Communications

We coordinate all outbound prospect communications from first contact through matriculation. We take a multichannel and segmented approach and rigorously test the effectiveness of each message. We customise messages to reach new student audiences and geographic markets.

Level of Performance

1	2	3	4	N/A

Best-in-Class Web and Mobile Experience

Our website and mobile presence are designed with prospects in mind. Our site is easy to navigate and clearly communicates what makes our institution distinctive. We feature authentic voices that speak to the value of a degree from our institution.

Level of Performance

1	2	3	4	N/A

Distinctive and Compelling Campus Visits

We regularly assess our campus visit experience end to end, from the registration portal to prospect follow-ups. We partner with estates, IT, academics, and students to ensure a seamless but authentic experience that communicates a compelling narrative about the university experience.

Level of Performance

1	2	3	4	N/A

Academic Experience

Course Revitalisation and Modernisation

We actively collect and analyse market data to strengthen the relevance of our courses and also introduce diverse perspectives into the curriculum, where appropriate. Our review processes and budgetary incentives support ongoing, academic-led portfolio calibration and innovation across both content and pedagogy.

Level of Performance

1	2	3	4	N/A

Accessible Formal and Informal Learning Resources

We proactively push resources to our students in both physical and digital environments. Library staff are essential partners who take their skills directly to students. Dedicated space and tools for collaborative learning and exploration are available across campus (e.g., makerspaces, VR/AR).

Level of Performance

1	2	3	4	N/A

Accountability and Incentives for Academic Advisors

The advising office has clear performance indicators that measure advisors' contributions to key student attainment and success metrics. Advisors have regular professional development opportunities and career ladders aligned with their contributions to goals.

Level of Performance

1	2	3	4	N/A

Administrative Experience

Coordinated Student Support

Student-facing support offices (advising, tutoring, career, etc.) are networked with technology and processes to responsibly share data on students, collaborate on cases, and respond quickly to students in need.

Level of Performance

1	2	3	4	N/A

Continuous Improvement Mindset and Culture

Regular student feedback indicates major pain points in student-facing support services. Prioritisation exercises signal which 'broken' processes have the greatest impact on student experience and learning outcomes. Cross-functional teams address the greatest offenders.

Level of Performance

1	2	3	4	N/A

Digital-First Environment

We understand the technology expectations of 'digital native' students and have identified and plan to address expectation gaps. Our staff members (academic and administrative) have the appropriate digital skills, or we provide support to facilitate new technology adoption and wholesale digital transformation.

Level of Performance

1	2	3	4	N/A

Student Well-Being

Scoped and Scaled Mental Health Services

Students understand the scope of campus mental health services and how to access support. We promote a tiered model of care (e.g., group therapy, peer listening platforms, wellness coaching) before offering individualised counseling. A database of community agencies is maintained for high-need students.

Level of Performance

1	2	3	4	N/A

Infrastructure to Address Campus Climate Flashpoints

Targeted services and policies prevent and address instances of interpersonal conflict, bias, and other flashpoints that can disrupt a student's education. Dedicated staff, task forces, and resources are in place to respond privately and publicly when instances of bias occur.

Level of Performance

1	2	3	4	N/A

Proactive Sexual Violence Prevention Programmes

Our sexual violence prevention programmes and response structures adhere to legal requirements. Educational programming proactively addresses sexual violence prevention, response, and policy. Easy-to-navigate reporting structures resolve claims of abuse, adjudicate misconduct, and impose sanctions.

Level of Performance

1	2	3	4	N/A

Social Experience

First-Year Support Networks

Every student has peer-to-peer support interactions across his or her first year, especially to support advising and promote help-seeking behaviour. Academic and personal advisors track student engagement on campus, helping students develop social goals and successfully transition to university through appropriate 'nudges'.

Level of Performance

1	2	3	4	N/A

Student Experience-Minded Spaces

Investments in physical estates reflect their importance in student recruitment, attainment, and belonging. Campus planning taps into student and academic voices to ensure estates supports experience and learning objectives. Interactive spaces are the norm, not the exception.

Level of Performance

1	2	3	4	N/A

Resourcing and Structure for Student Activities

Our institution's social programme has clear mandate, ownership, and performance indicators. We support diverse organisations that contribute to major dimensions of wellness: environmental, physical, spiritual, occupational, etc.

Level of Performance

1	2	3	4	N/A

Career Preparation

Proactive and Coordinated Career Support

Career services staff work closely with academics to embed professional development and skills-building into the curriculum. We leverage our alumni network to the benefit of students. We frequently evaluate services and measure student satisfaction to improve services.

Level of Performance

1	2	3	4	N/A

Sequenced Career Exploration Programming

Across their curriculum, all students have a set of career development activities mapped alongside their academic coursework, including early opportunities to shadow employers, gain certifications or concentrations, or pursue career-focused recognition.

Level of Performance

1	2	3	4	N/A

Experiential Learning and Cocurricular Engagement

Academic staff have embedded experiential learning such as internships and co-ops into every course, removed barriers for under-resourced students, and given their students regular opportunities to reflect on the skills they have gained during their education.

Level of Performance

1	2	3	4	N/A

Snapshots of Student Experience Innovation

In seeking to address the six aspects of the total student experience, institutions will likely encounter structural and cultural roadblocks inherent to the sector's long-standing tradition of siloed problem-solving and decision-making. Overcoming these hurdles can be accomplished more easily with examples of institutions that have improved aspects of the student experience—and that's where EAB comes in. Below are just a few snapshots of innovative approaches for bringing a vision of total student experience to life.

Cocurricular Course Map

Queen's University (CAN) brought together career services, academic staff, and students to develop course-specific 'maps' that chart academic, cocurricular, and career exploration opportunities for every academic programme. The maps are a valuable resource in both recruitment and advising, as well as career pathing for students unsure of the connection between their degree and employment.

First-Generation Visibility Campaign

San Jose State University (USA) recognised that first-generation and minority students struggled with their transition into higher education. Campus leaders recruited other first-in-family and minority students, academic staff, and alumni to record videos describing their own paths to success at the institution. Videos are shared online through a social media campaign, as well as during new student programming.

Virtual Open Day

Wayne State University (USA) flipped the recruitment process: rather than inviting prospects to campus, leaders took the student experience to them via a VR app and 10,000 university-branded, cardboard headsets. Prospective students could tour campus, 'attend' graduation, visit classrooms, and more, boosting the university brand and increasing applicants from outside the region, where recruitment had been more challenging.

Personalised Campus Pathways

Deakin University (AUS) created the Scout wayfinding app to provide students with a portal into a digitally blended campus environment. Scout provides students with the fastest route and step-by-step directions to locations on each of its campuses, even inside buildings and across floors. Scout guides students towards essential facilities and services, such as a quiet place to study as measured by real-time library population density.

Demand-Sensing Platform

Swansea University (UK) accelerates the response to student concerns with the digital platform Unitu, on which thousands of students post feedback on the institution's operational and strategic decisions. Swansea leaders continually track and address issues and ideas that attract the most attention, leading to concrete progress on projects such as sustainable transportation and student mental health.

Top-to-Bottom Responsibility Scheme

University of Leicester (UK) emphasizes collective responsibility for student health and well-being by training every campus services employee—from porters and cleaners to managers and directors—to flag potential student issues. In the Making Every Contact Count campaign, staff use postcard-sized referral forms to quickly escalate any potential concerns for follow-up.

Innovative Pedagogy Detector

University of Maryland, Baltimore County (USA) uses data signals in the learning management system to identify effective instructors. High levels of student engagement and success in the LMS platform often indicate innovative pedagogy; after following up, academic leaders give such instructors a platform to share their approaches with other academic staff, helping good ideas go viral.

Just-in-Time Nudges

Colorado State University (USA) developed the YOU@CSU platform to deliver timely academic and personal support to students by nudging them towards resources that address their specific needs. The mobile-optimised platform uses short 'Reality Check' quizzes to assess students' current state of well-being and provide them with customised support based on any areas of concern, such as stress or physical health.

How EAB Can Help Your Campus's Total Student Experience Efforts

1 **Conduct an opportunity analysis** of your current student experience approach to identify areas of strength and opportunity

2 **Identify proven solutions** from EAB's best practice library that match your campus's unique priorities

3 **Convene expert-led consultations** to strategise implementation and discuss lessons learned from other campuses

4 **Leverage our global network** of 1,500+ higher education institutions to connect you with innovative thought-leaders

5 **Facilitate an on-campus workshop** to jump-start a communication strategy or accelerate an action plan

▶ Learn more at **eab.com/studentexperience**

EAB

Washington DC | Richmond | Birmingham | Minneapolis | New York

202.747.1000 | eab.com