

Meeting students where they are at. How a pandemic response became best practice for student retention

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Abstract

The Retention project, now in its third year, focuses on meeting students where they are at, to provide a proactive, early intervention to resolve issues they might be facing during their studies. The project is delivered by the Students' Union in partnership with the university employing over 20 student staff to make calls all year round. During these calls, students are asked about their programme, extracurricular experience, loneliness, any pressures they are facing, and are offered advice and directly referred to the relevant University and Students' Union services where required. The calls provide a safe, social connection with a student peer positively impacting on the sense of belonging and retention. Over the three years, 95% of students who have completed the check-in call continue with their studies.

The project acts as a blueprint for partnership working between the University and Students' Union and contributes to delivering key student success objectives supporting the work of Personal Tutors and Professional Services. The insights from the calls have also informed improvements to university services and processes, including follow-up research on housing and initiatives to support with the cost-of-living crisis.

Keywords: Student retention; peer support; partnership work

Summary

Established in September 2020, the Greenwich Students' Union Retention Project focuses on providing proactive peer-to-peer support to all University of Greenwich students once a term through a wellbeing check-in phone conversation. Student feedback has highlighted the variety of external pressures students face including financial costs, commuting, housing, part-time work and caring responsibilities which impact on engaging fully with their studies, and the need to provide more tailored signposting and support to students to address these challenges. The key aim of the project is to support students with low attendance to re-engage with their studies by linking them to relevant support services, social activities and by increasing their sense of belonging to the university community. The project has helped to facilitate 1000's of one-to-one calls, providing personalised, peer-led support.

The project has had a significant impact on the individual lives of students retaining those most at risk of dropping out and supporting them to succeed. The insights from the calls have shaped the institution's understanding of the experience of students at Greenwich, helping us to develop student centric support services and initiatives that are responsive to students' needs.

Project Background

Established in response to the Covid-19 pandemic and move to online learning, Greenwich Students' Union partnered with the University to deliver a peer-led telephone wellbeing check for every undergraduate student during September to December 2020. The campaign initially focused on first year undergraduate students and students deemed to be most at risk of poor wellbeing and discontinuing their studies and was extended in term 2 to include postgraduate taught students. This successful intervention focused on talking to students about their wellbeing, offering advice, and making signposted referrals to relevant services when needed. The call also provided social connections, at a time when many were isolated, to one of 58 peer callers. Established as a response to the pandemic, the project has since become an integral part of university processes to improve attendance, retention and provide students with personalised support, now calling all undergraduate and postgraduate students over three terms. During the last academic year 2021/22, the project made 53,994 calls to 21,404 individual students and completed 8,615 check-ins.

Discussion

The project aims to call every undergraduate, postgraduate taught and postgraduate research student at least once per term. These calls are conducted by trained student staff to provide peer-to-peer support and increase students' sense of belonging.

All student callers are trained by Students' Union and university staff from relevant services at the start of each term to cover key university processes, services, and effective signposting and escalation. The student callers are supervised by a permanent member of staff who is on site to support with any difficult conversations or follow-up. All student callers have regular 121 meetings with their supervisor, a daily debrief session about their calls as well as access to members of the university's Wellbeing team if they wish to discuss any content of the calls to ensure they are fully supported.

A guided conversation helps the university and Students' Union understand the support students need; they are asked about their learning experience, community, balance of university and home life, loneliness, finances, and awareness of key support services such as Academic Skills and Wellbeing. Their answers help to

identify students who might be at risk of withdrawing and connect them to the right support.

If an issue cannot be resolved during the call, the concern is escalated to the relevant University service who will contact the student directly. After each call, students also receive an email detailing all the services referenced on the call should they need them.

The initial aims of the project were to mitigate the expected increase in student non-continuation rates due to Covid-19 and provide a peer-led opportunity to check-in with students, offer support and (re)establish a sense of belonging to the University community while studying online. The focus on retention has remained, with the project now prioritising students flagged through the University's Student Engagement Policy for non-attendance to ensure timely support is offered to these students so they can re-engage with their studies at the earliest opportunity. The project is also flexible to respond to current world events and check in with students who may have been impacted by these and in need of further support, e.g., the war in Ukraine, floods in Bangladesh, economic crisis in Sri Lanka.

Calls are being conducted during all three terms for 12 weeks each, with the call centre operating from Mondays to Fridays between 10am to 5pm as well as one evening shift. The call centre is staffed with 12-16 student staff each day allowing the team to make hundreds of calls daily. As the project currently focuses on students with low attendance, data is received on a weekly basis from the Student Engagement & Success Team highlighting students who have received stage 1-3 escalation warnings for non-attendance in line with the university's policy. These students are prioritised to support them to re-engage with their classes before receiving another escalation email. Further prioritisation of calls is dependent on the time of year, e.g., first year students after Welcome or returning interrupting students before the start of the new academic year. A robust data sharing agreement is in place between the Students' Union and the university to provide this student data as needed.

Outcomes and Impact

In 2020/21, the same retention rate was maintained for undergraduate (4.5%) and postgraduate students (4.1%) in comparison to 2019/20, despite the challenges students faced during the pandemic. Out of all the students called in term 1 and 2 that year, only 1% withdrew or interrupted that academic year. 98% of students called found the conversation useful. Of the 506 students who indicated during the check-in that they were considering withdrawing or interrupting, 90% continued their studies with relevant support put in place to help them succeed.

In term 1, the project contacted all 13,313 undergraduate students at least once in 12 weeks. 6,292 wellbeing checks were completed over this period (47% of total student cohort). This included 216 students who were self-isolating. We were able to quickly

identify the correct support for students at risk, making 428 (7% of completed wellbeing checks) escalations to university support services.

In term 2, all undergraduate and postgraduate students (19,892) were contacted at least once, with 7,735 completed wellbeing checks conducted (38% of total student cohort). 262 escalations of students at risk (3%) were made to support services.

In 2021-22, the project made 53,994 calls to 21,404 individual students. Of these, 9,193 students received a call in two terms and 2,997 students received a call in all three terms. This means that 92% of the student population were called at least once that academic year.

During the call, students were asked whether they were considering withdrawing from or interrupting their studies. Of the 163 students who answered yes during term 1 and term 2 calls, only 35 students had withdrawn or interrupted by the end of the year, and only two of these were overseas students.

In the 2022 Advance HE Student Academic Experience Survey (full-time undergraduate students only) 30% of respondents considered withdrawing compared to 4% of Greenwich undergraduate students called via the project.

Overall, 97% of students who completed the check-in call continued their studies in 2021-22.

In addition to the positive impact for students receiving a call, the project also provides guaranteed part-time employment for ca. 25 student staff during term-time.

Conclusion

Since last academic year, we have been prioritising checking in with students who have missed classes, linking them with support as early as possible to help them re-engage with their studies. Prioritising this group of students supports the work of Retention and Success Officers and Personal Tutors who may not have capacity to follow up with students at each stage of the attendance process on an individual basis. Ensuring these students receive relevant and timely support and are linked in with the appropriate services significantly contributes to the University's strategic priority to improve continuation and completion rates.

The project supports the delivery of the University's Student Success Sub Strategy objective of delivering a 'personalised learning experience'. The project also calls postgraduate research students as well as APP student groups further supporting key metrics on student success.

The calls not only allow us to have a 1-2-1 check-in with the student but also give us wider insights into current student issues enabling us to be pre-emptive in developing support for specific student groups.

As the project has grown, it has become increasingly agile, proactively supporting students impacted by current events. For example, during the last academic year we were able to call our Russian, Belarusian, Ukrainian, Sri Lankan and Bangladeshi students to support them as developments at home made it increasingly difficult to engage in their studies. This year, we called students following the earthquakes in Syria and Turkey, as well as our Pakistani students given the current political and economic situation there.

The insights gained from the calls are shared with key University stakeholders on a regular basis complementing established student feedback mechanisms and feeding into formal governance structures. The student feedback received during the calls has informed changes to university processes to better support all students. This year, insights and student feedback gained from the calls have informed our extensive cost of living support which included further research by Greenwich Students' Union and the launch of several support schemes such as food vouchers and free community meals. Other follow-up research projects to better understand students' experiences referenced during the calls include students' housing and living situations as well as the impact of part-time work on engaging with their studies.

Finally, the project acts as a blueprint for partnership working between the University and Students' Union. All aspects of the project including funding, data sharing agreement, student staff training, the referral process and insights work are rooted in a strong working relationship between key University and Students' Union staff to make this project a success and use its insights as a driver for implementing change.

The project alone is not and cannot be the silver bullet for the age-old sector question of how best to engage students, but it has become one important way of 'meeting our students where they are', understanding their experiences and acting on these insights.

References

AdvanceHE (2022) *Student Experience Survey 2022*. AdvanceHE. Available from <https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/student-academic-experience-survey-2022>. [accessed 30 April 2023].