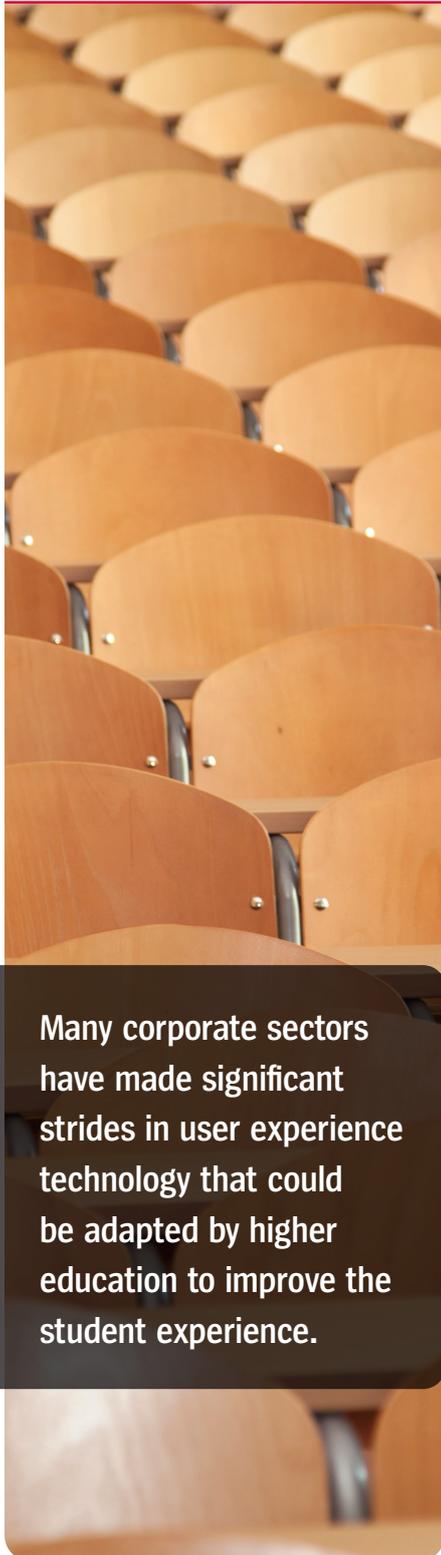


Does your tech delight or disappoint students?

Three keys to elevate the **student experience**

By Leon Sayers



Many corporate sectors have made significant strides in user experience technology that could be adapted by higher education to improve the student experience.

Smart higher education leaders are using Artificial Intelligence (AI), automation, and sentiment analytics to build their brands, improve student attraction, boost education outcomes, and build life-long learning relationships.

Is the “student experience” one of your university’s selling points? If so, how confident are you that your students’ actual experiences are living up to your intentions? Many corporate sectors have made significant strides in user experience technology that could be adapted by higher education.

When the remote student experience doesn’t measure up to students’ day-to-day experience, remote students’ disappointment and frustration hamper their learning and make them drop-out risks.

After COVID-19 forced a massive pivot to remote learning, now is the perfect time for universities to reassess their decisions and adapt proven technology to give students the experience they deserve and enjoy. In doing so, universities will foster loyalty, commitment, and appeal. University IT teams had to vault forward five years in a couple of months to enable remote learning for the entire student body – an admirable accomplishment. But decisions made in urgency might not be optimal for the long term. It is important not to let yesterday’s expedient decisions be an obstacle when better solutions present themselves today, after the entire world had gained an incredible amount of experience with working and learning online.

Beyond the Lecture Hall - Two Student Experience Gaps

Two student experience gaps pose serious challenges for universities today. One is the gap between remote and on-campus students. Remote students may not have access to equipment or technology required that on-campus students have readily available. There are also less opportunities for students to engage with lecturers, staff and other students. This further limits their learning and socialising opportunities.

When the remote students don’t have the same opportunities as on-campus students, the unfairness is palpable and the results predictable – discouraged students, lower performance, and a high risk of attrition. Now that the hybrid environment is a permanent feature of almost all institutions including universities, that gap needs to be closed, especially as resistance grows to paying full tuition for distance learning.

A [study](#) found that 50% of Australian university students are unhappy with online learning, citing “lack of engagement”, less time overall in class, isolation from their peers, IT issues, and examinations and assessments particularly difficult and potentially unfair. A [U.S. study](#) found that 71% of surveyed college students indicated increased stress and anxiety due to the COVID-19 outbreak. U.S. media is rife with anecdotal evidence of student dissatisfaction with their remote experience compared to on-campus: [“Zoom University” is Making Me Hate Learning](#) and [A College Student’s](#)



Students accustomed to elegant interfaces, simple payment transactions, intuitive search, and the “you might likes” of apps they use with ease every day are going to be decidedly unenthused when they encounter a university system lacking those features.

[Viral Tweet About The Stress Of Online School Shows How Education Is Being Impacted By The Coronavirus](#) – and in the UK, ‘I can’t get motivated’: the students struggling with online learning.

According to *The Conversation*, “In October 2019 almost 51,000 new and returning international students arrived in Australia. In October 2020, this figure had fallen by 99.7% — to just 130.... More than 40% of the sector’s annual student revenue now comes from international students,” many of whom are learning remotely and thus more than likely having an experience inferior to their on-campus counterparts.

The other gap is between students’ experience as consumers and what they typically encounter in their interactions with universities. The unfortunate truth is that universities, despite recent gains, lag corporations in terms of automation, ease of interaction, and continual learning for constant tailoring and adapting to user preferences and interests. Students accustomed to elegant interfaces, simple payment transactions, intuitive search, and the “you might likes” of apps they use with ease every day are going to be decidedly unenthused when they encounter a university system lacking those features.

What are typical frustration points? Stories abound of students hanging on hold trying to get simple questions answered, tediously navigating across dozens of screens to find or input necessary information, cumbersome interfaces, manually clicking through processes that require repetitive input and lack intuitive workflow, trying to schedule their class timetables in coordination with systems that don’t port seamlessly across devices, failure to capture information so as to “recognise” the student and tailor future interactions accordingly, and difficulty of productive interactions with instructors.

And that’s just during onboarding. Once classes begin, other tech challenges manifest. Remote students accustomed to in-person work groups struggle to collaborate with their study partners. They lack easy interaction with their instructors and on-site students. Keep in mind that students learn best when instructors can inspire and motivate them – a challenge under the best of circumstances and made much more difficult when distance, lack of eye contact, strained interactions, and tech challenges pervade the experience.

Little wonder that dropouts are rife. According to the U.S. National Student Clearinghouse, only 74% of first-time first-year students returned for a second year. As competition for students heats up, traditional universities are finding that their online competitors have a substantial technology advantage.

How can universities improve the student experience? Here are proven technologies successfully used in other industries that offer the agility that universities can deploy on behalf of students.

Pervasive Automation

Clearly, automation is an obvious solution to manual processes that frustrate students and impede their learning. But what is one of the biggest obstacles to making digital improvements on behalf of users? It is the siloed landscape of deeply embedded automation all around an enterprise. When various departments in a university have each chosen technology for their own purposes, the result is isolated systems, opportunistic and haphazard, creating cumbersome, redundant processes performed thousands of times by different individuals on different systems.

If your university is still immersed in this kind of fractured environment, your student experience intentions will be all but impossible to accomplish. Instead, the solution is *pervasive automation*. That means deploying a single integrated platform embedded



With pervasive automation, a student could access a single platform to collaborate with peer partners, correspond with an instructor, mentor a fellow student, make tuition payments, access a training video, access their email, look up health protection policies, and seek tech support for a connectivity challenge.

throughout the enterprise, within and across every tool, team, platform, and location, and serving all parties – students, faculty, administrators, finance, etc. Instead of serving a single purpose, pervasive automation enables all existing tools to work consistently as one and seamless collaboration regardless of device. And for additional value, it incorporates artificial intelligence and machine learning.

For example, a student could access a single platform to collaborate with peers, correspond with an instructor, mentor a fellow student, make tuition payments, access a training video, access their email, look up health protection policies, and seek tech support for a connectivity challenge. Just one system to learn, with fast, easy, intuitive switching for other purposes – similar to your mobile banking app.

User-Centric Onboarding

With Artificial Intelligence (AI)-driven smarter agents, the onboarding process of students and faculty could be made faster, consistent, proactive, and informed. AI could perform tasks that formerly required full human interaction, thus avoiding those long waits on hold. Using available data, and then learning from experience by combining it with new data it could continually improve the ability to provide information and support. Ideally, the smart agent would be fluent in multiple languages to support international students who are likely attending remotely, rather than requiring translations which tend to be problematic and imprecise.

The smart agent could welcome students onboard and handle the initial orientation briefing about policies, schedules, and available resources – all without any additional university employee interaction or intervention. It can identify the devices, apps, and services the student needs and the e-training they will require. Students can extract the information from the smart agent quickly and easily. They can feel comfortable asking the agent sensitive questions that they would rather not put to a live person. With a conversational user interface, the smart agent lets students become comfortable with the new environment and culture, hastening their transition to learning and enjoying the experience.

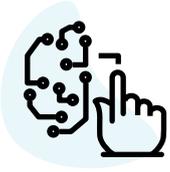
Sentiment and Experience Analysis

In today's unusually difficult hybrid environment, it is more important than ever to keep a finger on the pulse of your students. They are bound to encounter study-from-home difficulties, diminished support, lack of fellow student interaction, isolation – all that on top of the normal rigors of higher education.

Some university administrators turn to web conferencing where they invite students to bring up their difficulties so they can extend assistance in resolving them. Such well-intentioned efforts invariably run up against individual student reluctance to complain or display their inabilities. They stay silent, the problems marinate and student dissatisfaction mounts silently.

Today's digital alternative to, "Tell me what's wrong, tell me what you need," is sentiment and experience analysis. Using natural language processing, computational linguistics, and text analysis techniques, sentiment analysis can gauge student experience in real time.

To improve the experience of the remote student, you can collect data on the service desk interactions of each student, ascribe an emotion to each interaction, and highlight trends (both positive and negative) that administrators can use to determine where they need to take action. Does the student have an inferior headset? Or bad connectivity? Sufficient security? This analysis can also identify who is having trouble in class,



Today's digital alternative to, "Tell me what's wrong, tell me what you need," is sentiment and experience analysis, which uses natural language processing, computational linguistics, and text analysis techniques to gauge student experience in real time.

Leon Sayers

Leon is Director of Advisory at Unisys APAC. He is a cloud evangelist who recognises the unique opportunity today's virtual environment extends to higher education.

Drawing on his 20-plus years in Information and Communications Technology, Leon has developed deep, first-hand insight into how organisations can leverage technology to achieve improved efficiencies, employee cultural change, and enhance productivity and performance. By sharing these insights with client organisations, he helps them achieve their change management goals by transforming people, processes, and technology.

He can be reached at
Leon.Sayers@unisys.com

giving in to distractions, exhibiting signs of withdrawal of lack or engagement, enabling proactive outreach to help the student engage, perhaps offering a list of potential tutors or pointing them to remedial sources.

By taking students' "temperature" this way, your university administrators can rapidly correct problems and improve the experience, instead of having to manually pore through thousands of chatlogs or conduct student satisfaction surveys while student dissatisfaction grows at the expense of learning.

Summary

The focus on the student experience could not be timelier or more critical. For one thing, it is an essential step in competing for students and securing their loyalty. But equally important is the attainment of your most vital mission – providing an inspiring and motivating environment in which students can learn productively and happily. Powerful advances in technology are available for you to effect great change and improvements with an agile strategy that spans not just technology but, people, process and culture.

Now is the time to ensure you set yourself up and put in place the partners and strategy to get there.

Our advice is to:

- Re-evaluate the decisions on technology and ways that it is leveraged that you made in rushing platforms into production to deal with the pandemic and offsite learning.
- Look outside the Education industry for solutions that prove the way things can be delivered through VR/AR, remote working from industries like public sector, manufacturing etc.
- Set a goal of achieving experience parity between on campus and off campus student engagements both educationally and socially for student wellbeing.
- Ensure you are putting in place technology and processes to measure user experience for both staff and students.

Learn more about how Unisys [digital workplace solutions](#) can deliver richer student experiences.



For more information visit www.unisys.com

© 2021 Unisys Corporation. All rights reserved.

Unisys and other Unisys product and service names mentioned herein, as well as their respective logos, are trademarks or registered trademarks of Unisys Corporation. All other trademarks referenced herein are the property of their respective owners.