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The Students' Perspective: Valuable Insights for University Leaders

What university leaders can do to support student success

CANADA EDITION

In the increasingly challenging realm of higher education, understanding the evolving needs, preferences, and expectations of students is paramount to helping ensure their retention, completion, and long-term success. This is against a backdrop of learners having more options and opportunities today to gain skills than ever before, as well as the value of higher education being questioned to a higher degree in parts of the world in recent years.

Anthology conducted a survey of more than 1,000 current students in Canada to provide context and perspective about the opportunities, challenges, preferences, and technology impact across a number of areas, including use of artificial intelligence (AI) and generative AI in higher education.
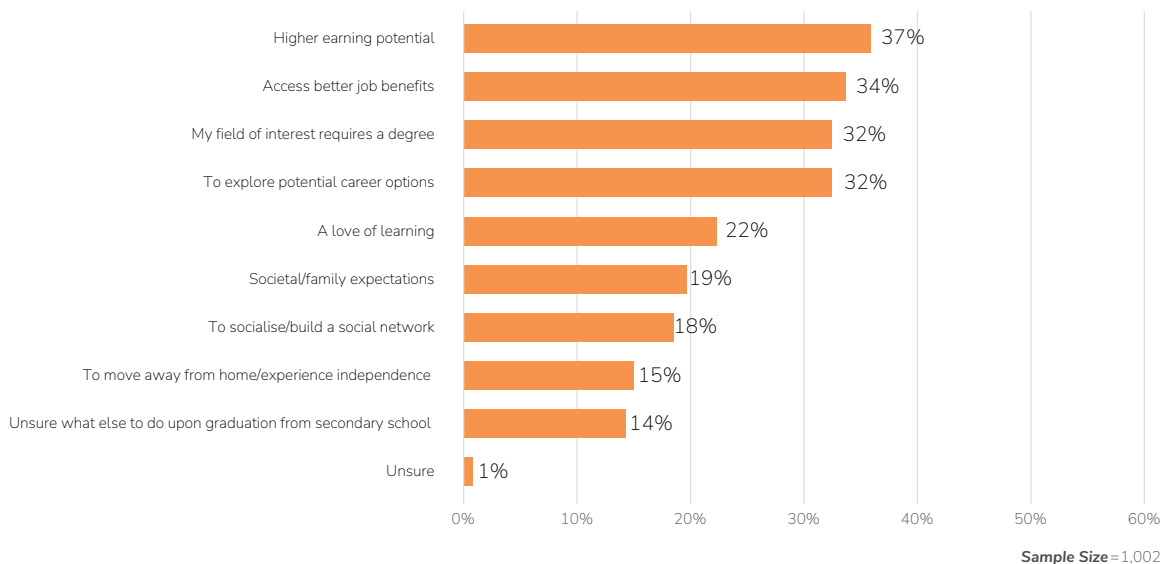
Through this research, Anthology aims to contribute to the enhancement of the higher education experience for students and universities in Canada as they work together to refine, and in some cases redefine, how teaching and learning take place. This includes providing actionable recommendations to improve services, support systems, and learning environments.

Student Motivations: From Enrolling to the Push for Completion and the Challenges in Between

Students have different reasons for enrolling in university and in pushing to complete their degree. A deeper understanding of their perspective can help universities adjust communications with future prospective students, but also provide additional services to ensure that students are successful while in university through to graduation. Students face a variety of challenges during their university career. By being aware of these challenges, university leadership will be better prepared to identify opportunities to support students and will help more students continue their studies and complete their degree.

Motivations for Enrolling

What were your primary motivations for enrolling at your current university?

Motivation	Percentage
Higher earning potential	37%
Access better job benefits	34%
My field of interest requires a degree	32%
To explore potential career options	32%
A love of learning	22%
Societal/family expectations	19%
To socialise/build a social network	18%
To move away from home/experience independence	15%
Unsure what else to do upon graduation from secondary school	14%
Unsure	1%

Sample Size = 1,002

The primary reasons for enrolling at university among Canadian students are generally practical in nature, led by having a higher earning potential, followed by better job benefits, and their field of interest requiring a degree as noted in the above chart. However, there are also other key reasons, including exploring potential careers for nearly one-third of respondents, as well as a love of learning for just under one of four respondents.

Outside of academics and workforce preparation, social and personal outlets are also important motivating factors to attend university, as about one in five students indicated that socialising/building a social network was one of their primary drivers for enrolling. Only 14% of students indicated that one of the reasons for going to university was an uncertainty of what else to do—this is an indication that overall, Canadian students are enrolling at university with clear goals in mind.

Opportunities for Universities

Based on this data, universities have opportunities to ensure that students can learn about potential career options throughout their education, given that this was important to more than one in three students. This may also be helpful for the group of students who were uncertain about what else to do. This group in particular will likely need more support than students who have identified their field of interest prior to enrolling in university, and as such universities should seek to proactively identify students who are less certain in order to be better able to guide them.

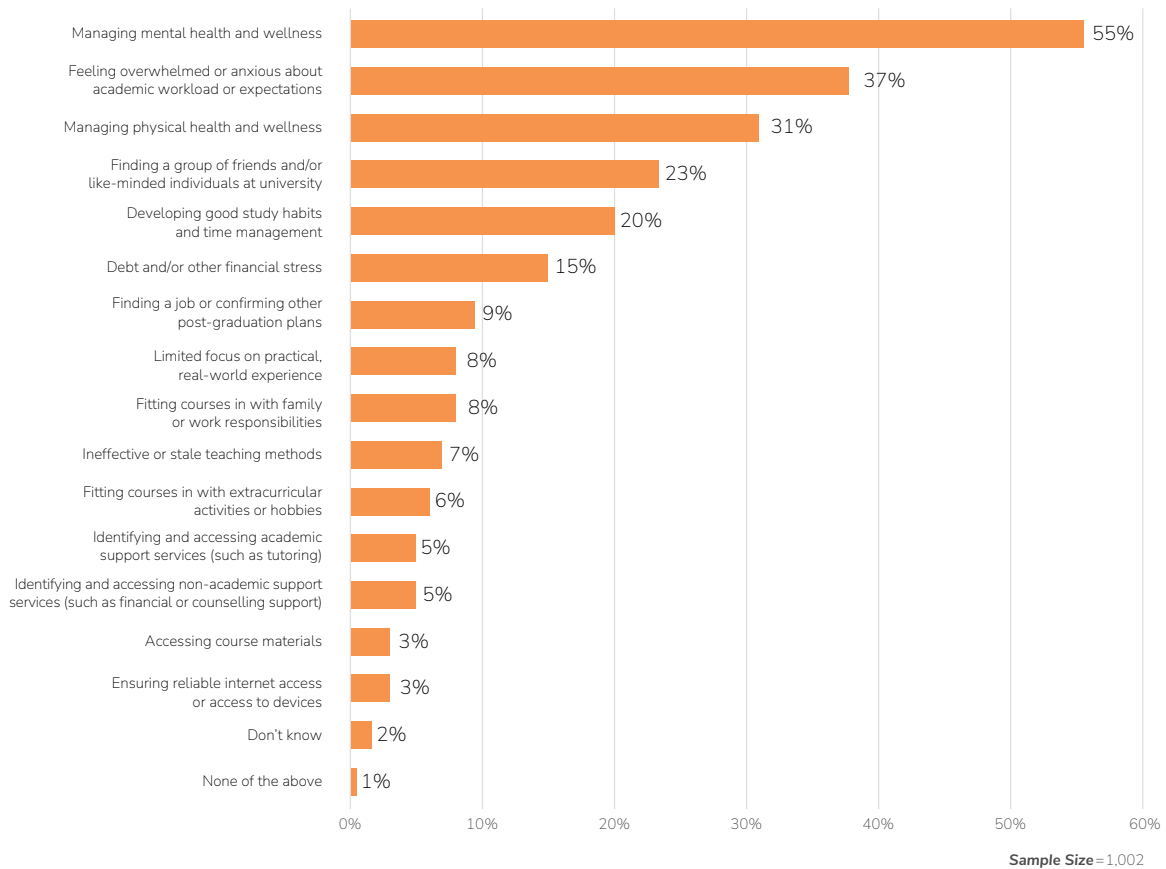## Motivations for completing a degree

Current students are primarily driven to complete their degree due to the potential of earning a higher income (57%), followed by having access to broader employment opportunities (28%), and building lifelong skills (27%). For nearly one in four, it is also to be able to find a professional position in their area of interest. Overall, the large majority of students are motivated to complete their degree because of the direct benefits associated with earning that degree.

Universities should consider using the motivational data related to enrolling and completion to inform communications to prospective students about the reasons for enrolling at their institution or in higher education in general, including a focus on earning potential, broader employment opportunities, and preparation for a career. This could help draw more students to the university, as prospective students will see alignment with their expectations as they consider various universities.

Challenges in the last 12 months

However, the student experience is not without challenges for Canadian students. 99% of respondents identified at least one significant challenge they faced in the last year.

What were the most pressing challenges for you at university this past term?

Challenge	Percentage
Managing mental health and wellness	55%
Feeling overwhelmed or anxious about academic workload or expectations	37%
Managing physical health and wellness	31%
Finding a group of friends and/or like-minded individuals at university	23%
Developing good study habits and time management	20%
Debt and/or other financial stress	15%
Finding a job or confirming other post-graduation plans	9%
Limited focus on practical, real-world experience	8%
Fitting courses in with family or work responsibilities	8%
Ineffective or stale teaching methods	7%
Fitting courses in with extracurricular activities or hobbies	6%
Identifying and accessing academic support services (such as tutoring)	5%
Identifying and accessing non-academic support services (such as financial or counselling support)	5%
Accessing course materials	3%
Ensuring reliable internet access or access to devices	3%
Don't know	2%
None of the above	1%

Sample Size = 1,002

The highest percentage of students—more than one of every two—reported that one of the most pressing challenges was managing their mental health and wellness, followed by nearly four in 10 indicating that they felt overwhelmed or anxious about academic workload or expectations. More than seven in 10 respondents indicated that one of these two were among the most pressing challenges they faced in the last 12 months. This is a significant percentage and clearly indicates the need for support in these areas—and the opportunity for universities to continue to make adjustments in supporting students' mental health and wellbeing. Overall, the various challenges above highlight the reality of the student experience and potential for additional support.
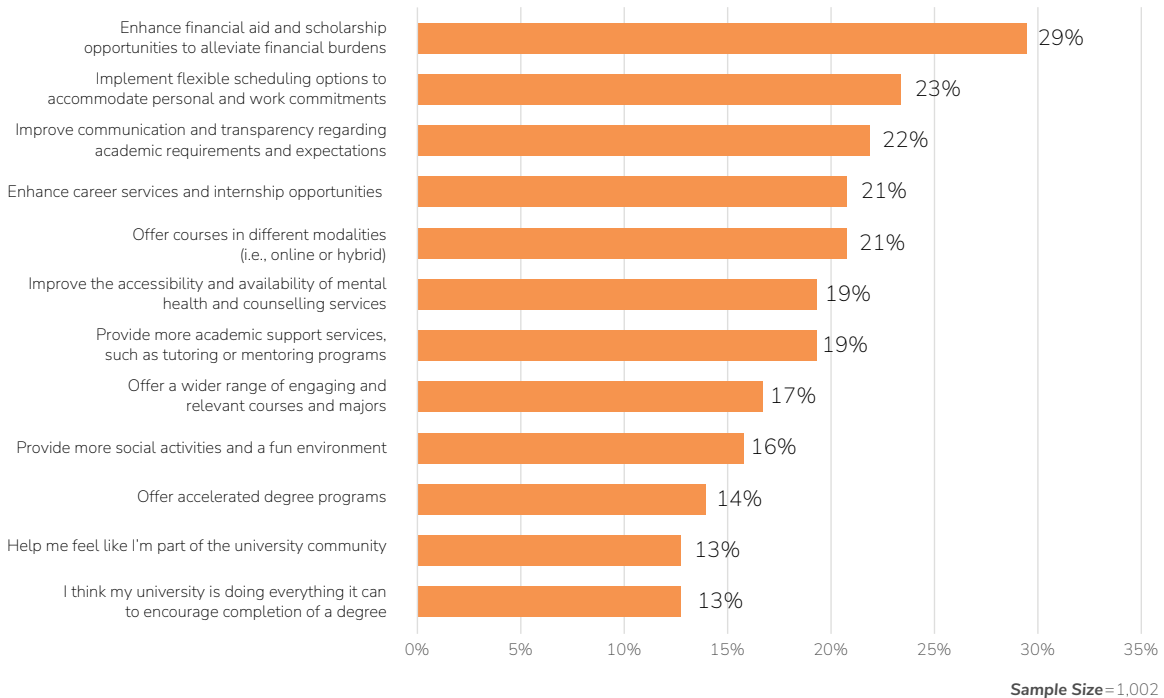
Additionally, a comparatively high percentage mentioned finding a group of friends and/or like-minded individuals at university (23%), as well as developing good study habits and time management. These are additional stressors that impact students' wellbeing and their likelihood of success. Having a group of friends has been shown to directly impact students' sense of belonging, which impacts their likelihood to remain at university (Strayhorn, 2018; O'Keeffe, 2013). Universities should review where there may be opportunities to build community, whether during orientation, by supporting a range of student clubs and societies, and/or by making it easy for students to connect with other students virtually if in a primarily online environment.

While there is much discussed about the challenges of financing higher education, this was only highlighted by fewer than one in six respondents. Universities should identify students who are concerned about financial stressors to determine whether more can be done to assist them.

Opportunities for universities: student perspective

Given the challenges that students identified, respondents were asked to share how their university could help them and their classmates complete their degrees.

What do you think your university can do to help you and your classmates be more likely to complete your degree?

Response	Percentage
Enhance financial aid and scholarship opportunities to alleviate financial burdens	29%
Implement flexible scheduling options to accommodate personal and work commitments	23%
Improve communication and transparency regarding academic requirements and expectations	22%
Enhance career services and internship opportunities	21%
Offer courses in different modalities (i.e., online or hybrid)	21%
Improve the accessibility and availability of mental health and counselling services	19%
Provide more academic support services, such as tutoring or mentoring programs	19%
Offer a wider range of engaging and relevant courses and majors	17%
Provide more social activities and a fun environment	16%
Offer accelerated degree programs	14%
Help me feel like I'm part of the university community	13%
I think my university is doing everything it can to encourage completion of a degree	13%

Sample Size=1,002

More than one in four respondents pointed to opportunities to enhance financial aid and scholarship availability, so even though this was not one of the primary challenges for respondents, there is a strong sentiment that these opportunities will help support fellow classmates. In addition, implementing more flexible scheduling options and offering courses in different modalities were mentioned by between one in four and one in five respondents. While not a high percentage individually, when combined, 39% of respondents raised one of these two options to improve the student experience. Students also pointed to opportunities to improve communication and transparency regarding academic requirements as a way to ensure degree completion, and an interest in greater career services and internship opportunities. In addition, nearly one in five highlighted improving the availability and accessibility of mental health and counselling services, as well as providing more academic support services. A separate question was asked specifically about whether students expect their university to provide assistance in helping them find a job after graduation—over two-thirds of students expect assistance in this area, further underlining an opportunity to enhance career services and ensure that students are taking advantage of these services. Overall, respondents were not aligned on a key approach to improving completion, indicating that universities are likely generally providing many of these services, but that there is more opportunity in many areas.

There are clear actions that universities should consider based on this data. Prioritizing wellness and mental health support seems paramount based on the responses—while this may not be fully in a university's remit, ensuring that students are aware of available services and how to access them is critical. Additionally, universities should consider ways to reduce the anxiety or pressure from academic expectations, ensuring students understand these expectations, feel prepared, and have strong study and time management skills. The challenges students face throughout their experience can impact their academic success as well as their happiness and sense of wellbeing.

Opportunities to Improve the Student Experience with Technology

In a more connected world, students are looking for technology to help them be more efficient. This study asked a series of questions related to ways that technology could be helpful to determine the level of interest on the part of students.

In perhaps surprising data for university leaders, students' preference of how courses are offered varied, with an equal percentage (35%) indicating a preference for face-to-face courses and a format that includes some online instruction, whether blended or hybrid. Twenty-six percent of respondents preferred fully online courses, whether asynchronous or synchronous. Overall, this does not provide a clear way for courses to be offered and university leaders should continue to explore ways to provide a variety of delivery formats for courses.

Universities should seek to reduce the number of systems or platforms that students have to use to complete assignments and other university processes, as 69% of students strongly agreed or agreed with the statement that there are too many systems to use. This presents an opportunity for university leaders to identify efficiencies in systems, and in doing so, also get better access to student data. One area where there has already been progress made is that most students (87%) report having access to a self-service portal where they can view academic progress to see if they are on track. However, 39% feel that while the information is provided, it is not easy to consume. For the 11% of students who do not have this type of information readily available, it is critical for institutions to invest in technology to help inform students of their progress. Only 2% of students indicated that having such a portal would not be helpful to them.

As indicated throughout this report, students are looking for more support, and one of the opportunities is through more personalised communications. The large majority of students would find the following types of information helpful to receive:

- Reminders about upcoming deadlines such as course registrations, etc. (81%)

- Reminders about assignments due in class (80%)

- Recommendations for courses to take based on their major (80%)

- Recommendations of courses to take based on career goals (78%)

- Information about upcoming student organisation events (69%)

Providing reminders about assignments being due and when course registration starts are easy opportunities for success, as many of these features are already built into learning management systems and CRM platforms. Universities should encourage faculty members to use the learning management system for all courses, as this creates a consistent experience for students as far as receiving reminders about assignments that are due as well as how assignments are turned in. The more consistency that can be provided in these ways, the more likely students will turn in assignments on time and be successful.

In addition, students want to have course content available to them in a variety of ways. Seventy-six percent of students felt that the ability to choose whether to listen to or read course content would be extremely or very helpful, while 66% indicated that being able to read content from the learning management system on their mobile device would be extremely or very helpful. Universities should work with faculty members and encourage them to make content available in these ways, as it increases the likelihood that students will consume the content.

Overall, these are areas that present opportunities to universities to increase their use of data and technology to deliver more detailed recommendations more efficiently. Incorporating recommended courses will result in conversations with advisors being more focused, as students will have already been able to explore recommendations on their own.

In considering how best to communicate with students, they continue to prefer email as the primary way to hear from the university, with 47% indicating that more personalised communications with relevant information are preferred as one of two favoured methods of communication, followed by more general broadcast emails (38%). The next highest option was text messages at 22% of respondents. This can be helpful as universities consider how to best reach students. Overall, 74% of students indicated a preference for email communications.
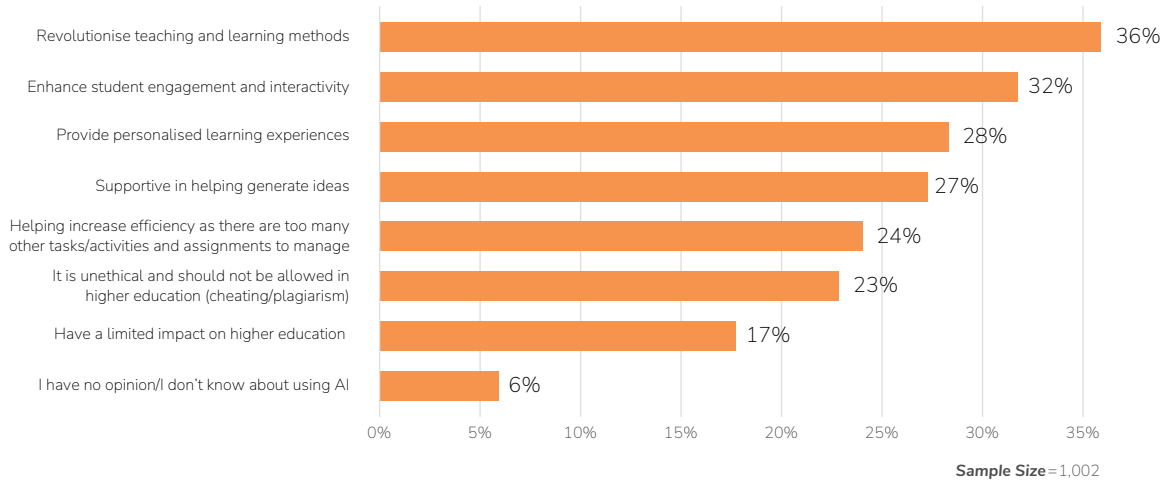
Students' View of Artificial Intelligence and its Impact on Higher Education

In today's dynamic landscape of higher education, the emergence and integration of artificial intelligence (AI) have brought forth both incredible opportunities and complex challenges. As Canada's universities embrace this new age, understanding the unique viewpoints of students is vital in capitalising on the potential of AI while also addressing potential ethical, pedagogical, and operational challenges.

Students are already actively using generative AI tools—17% report using it weekly, while an additional 26% consider themselves occasional users (at least monthly). An additional 31% have used these tools once or twice. Therefore, nearly three in four students have at least experimented with generative AI tools. Moreover, 52% of students believe their use of generative AI will increase in the next six months, showing increasing adoption of these tools among students.

Student view of role of AI in higher education

What role do you think artificial intelligence will play in higher education?

Category	Percentage
Revolutionise teaching and learning methods	36%
Enhance student engagement and interactivity	32%
Provide personalised learning experiences	28%
Supportive in helping generate ideas	27%
Helping increase efficiency as there are too many other tasks/activities and assignments to manage	24%
It is unethical and should not be allowed in higher education (cheating/plagiarism)	23%
Have a limited impact on higher education	17%
I have no opinion/I don't know about using AI	6%

Sample Size = 1,002

While it is to be expected that students more quickly adopt new technology such as generative AI, it is equally important that university leaders and faculty members familiarise themselves with this technology to adjust and incorporate it into their teaching, as students are also identifying new opportunities for AI in their university experience.

Nearly four in 10 students feel that AI tools will be helpful in revolutionising teaching and learning methods, while just under one in three see opportunities for AI to enhance student engagement and interactivity. In addition, more than one in four students point to providing personalised learning experiences as well as being supportive in generating ideas as ways that AI will impact higher education. There is an opportunity to continue to highlight the potential of AI both inside and outside of the classroom, while ensuring that students are also aware of possible drawbacks of using generative AI technology. In a sign of work being done by universities to address the potential implications of AI, 76% of students indicated that they are aware of what is considered permissible use of AI at their university. This shows that universities have generally not only created policies, but also educated students on those policies, which is a critical part of ensuring the responsible use of AI.

Concluding Thoughts

These survey results highlight opportunities in a variety of areas where Canadian universities can review, adjust, and refine approaches to help improve the student experience, whether in or outside of the classroom. Universities should review the approach to technology and systems, identify ways to increase student support, and use insights about students' motivation to adjust communication strategies.

In addition, artificial intelligence is only going to increase in impact and students appear relatively open to and interested in how AI can affect the student experience. Universities should continue to identify ways to incorporate AI in a strategic way, while ensuring that students are aware of the benefits and risks associated with AI.

About Anthology

Anthology offers the largest EdTech ecosystem on a global scale for education, supporting more than 150 million users in 80 countries. With a mission to provide dynamic, data-informed experiences to the global education community through Anthology Intelligent Experiences™, we help learners, leaders, and educators achieve their goals by offering over 60 SaaS products and services designed to advance learning. Discover more about how we are fulfilling our mission for education, business, and government institutions at **www.anthology.com.**

Methodology

Data collection was conducted online among students in Canada in August 2023 using an online survey platform. Respondents had to indicate that they were currently enrolled at a higher education institution and pursuing a degree or diploma to qualify for the survey. In total, 1,002 students qualified for and completed the survey.

References:

O'Keeffe, P. (2013). *A sense of belonging: Improving student retention.* College Student Journal, 47(4), 605-613.

Strayhorn, T.L. (2018). *College students' sense of belonging: A key to educational success for all students.* New York, NY: Routledge.