



Using education technology to support staff and students in Europe, the Middle East and Africa

THE


anthology

Promoting success for all learners

With major change occurring in the EMEA region's higher education sector, universities must identify their biggest challenges and create robust strategies to meet students' needs

The EMEA (Europe, the Middle East and Africa) region boasts some of the finest universities on the planet. Europe, for instance, is home to just over 40 per cent of the institutions making up *Times Higher Education's* list of the best universities in the world.

However, just like any other region, EMEA faces challenges. Although the poverty rate is largely consistent across the region – one in four children grow up below the poverty line according to recent statistics – this belies huge variation when the market is examined in more detail. These discrepancies also reveal the inequality that hinders educational attainment.

Fortunately, the challenges facing higher education in the region are surmountable, with institutions and private sector bodies working together to ensure that all learners can achieve the educational outcomes they deserve regardless of their background, geography or financial means. Anthology, a leading education technology company with a mission to provide dynamic, data-informed experiences to the global education community, believes it is possible for higher education to meet the needs of all learners.

Student-centric learning

"One of the biggest challenges that universities are facing is being able to meet different stakeholder requirements," says Louise Thorpe, vice-president and head of client experience for EMEA at

Anthology. "At the same time, universities are trying to run a successful business. More recently, there have been strategic challenges as institutions look ahead to a post-pandemic world. What aspects of the transformations they made should be retained and which ones should be discarded?"

"Universities in EMEA are responding in very different ways to recent challenges," says Joel Armando, senior client experience manager at Anthology. "In terms of the student journey, some institutions are largely being reactive and trying to keep up with new developments while others are being more proactive, strategically planning ways to create a student journey that offers both a digital and campus experience – one that is blended by default."

Most universities are not planning to move to a fully online model but must find a balance that works for students regardless of their course or background. It's also worth remembering that digital tools are not just for teaching and learning – they can inform recruitment, graduation and student socialising. Remote tools may have been implemented by institutions as an emergency measure, but they are here to stay. Universities must decide exactly what form they will take.

There is plenty of talk around student-led learning in the higher education space, but Thorpe believes "student-centric" learning is set to play a bigger role. "The dilemma around student-led learning is will it push learners out of their comfort zone enough? Will it necessarily work for other stakeholders – the academics,

professional bodies and accreditation agencies that influence the student journey?" she says.

"I can see pockets of innovation where students are included in the planning, design or feedback of a course but this is only possible where there is proper strategic planning in place," Armando acknowledges. "It doesn't happen just because teaching is moving online. Many institutions would like to offer a more student-centric model but it's not easy. It's not just about technology. It requires cultural change too."

When implemented successfully, a student-led approach can empower learners with a sense of ownership, ensuring they play a key role in their course outcomes rather than simply following instructions. Guaranteeing that such an approach is a fruitful one, however, will require a significant mindset shift for higher education institutions.

Avoiding staff burnout

With all the change that has taken place at universities over the past two years, the need to manage staff workloads and avoid burnout has become more important than ever. For Armando, the key is not to leave staff to simply get on with things but make sure support is offered proactively. "I believe professional development should be prioritised to prevent staff burnout," she says. "There need to be strategic plans for faculty members that are not simply focused on learning new tools but that reflect on new teaching methodologies and look to incorporate everything that has been learnt over the last two years in terms of offering innovative practices."

The rise of asynchronous teaching models has added another challenge in terms of managing staff fatigue. "With asynchronous teaching, how much are faculty members expected to do? How can you monitor this? At what times of the day or week do they respond? The capacity issue is not that there is a lack of willingness on the part of academics, but whether they should be 'always on,'" Thorpe says.

Clearly, there is a greater focus on well-being in higher education than ever before. Universities must remember to direct this focus on both students and staff.



How technology supports change

Universities must adapt to the changes higher education is experiencing. If used to its full potential, technology can play a central role in ensuring institutions evolve successfully

Education technology (edtech) has transformed the university experience for learners and staff, enabling a transition to hybrid learning that has created opportunities but also raised new challenges. Of course, some institutions are further along this road than others, with levels of technological maturity varying substantially between universities in the EMEA region.

"One of the main advantages of edtech solutions is the extra data they deliver," says Vafa Kazdal, vice-rector of academic affairs at ADA University in Azerbaijan. "This allows institutions to utilise a more evidence-based decision-making process. At our university, we provide a hybrid model that increases access to education, including an international partnership with George Washington University in the US. But this model predates the pandemic; it has formed part of our edtech deployment for a number of years."

As Kazdal says, access to data is one of the key advantages of greater technological uptake in the higher education space. "Data is key, but we

need to have access to it in a detailed and granular way," says Carlos Garriga, chief information officer at IE Business School, based in Madrid. "Every digital interaction needs to be recorded, stored and easily accessible so we can extract value from it. Due to the paradigm shift accelerated by the pandemic, the proportion of digital interactions has never been so high. The data we have access to is telling us more than ever."

Managing asynchronous delivery

The adoption of edtech tools has not merely meant a shift from taking notes in lecture theatres to watching academics on Zoom. More importantly, it has led to entirely new modes of teaching, one of the most significant being a movement towards asynchronous learning.

"Asynchronous delivery cannot be viewed in isolation," says Dolf Jordaen, deputy director of e-learning and media development at the University of Pretoria. "One of our strategic focuses, even before Covid, was student wellness. When the pandemic struck, we were not

uniquely affected, of course, but we were unique in terms of the diversity of our student population. Our data and student feedback indicate that our cohort has, by and large, been able to manage the shift in higher education using a mixture of synchronous communication and asynchronous learning."

"I think asynchronous learning has always been with us and its acceleration is one of the legacies of the pandemic," says Richard Walker, head of programme design and learning at the University of York. "Interestingly, we've seen faculties using a mixture of synchronous and asynchronous learning to improve student outcomes – it doesn't have to be one or the other."

Preparing students for work

One area where edtech continues to grapple with challenges is assessment. Although online assessments are increasingly considered just as credit-worthy as certifications gained in person, there remains a transparency issue surrounding remote assessment.

"I think many higher education institutions have had a problem with assessment," Kazdal says. "This is an area where all universities should commit a heightened effort to find a solution, whether it's in terms of the content or the educational technology itself. Currently, as we are moving to a post-pandemic landscape, we are combining digital and conventional assessments, such as on-campus examinations and proctoring systems. Of course, the most efficient method would be to continue assessments in an entirely digitalised manner but, again, transparency remains a significant problem preventing this."

"One of the main roles for any university is preparing its student body to join the workplace," Garriga says. "The way we work now is very different even to the way we worked two years ago. Beyond assessment, edtech can help prepare students for the world of work, and not only in terms of the tools they use. Edtech can also inform learners of digital etiquette, how to combine face-to-face experiences with online ones, and how to collaborate remotely. These are all areas that can be trained at university using educational technology and directly applied after graduation."



“Edtech tools have led to entirely new modes of teaching”

Prioritising data protection and security

Universities are adapting their digital strategies to get the most out of edtech systems while ensuring data collection prioritises compliance and transparency

Although many institutions in EMEA have been working with edtech solutions for some time, there has undoubtedly been a rapid acceleration in recent years. In 2020, for example, edtech startups secured \$2.2 billion (£1.77 billion) in private equity and venture capital funding, an increase of almost 30 per cent when compared with 12 months previously.

For some institutions, this surge in adoption was merely a continuation of their existing strategy. But for others, the pandemic forced them into crisis mode. Technology was adopted out of necessity rather than as a strategic development. "From a technology perspective, both from the client and provider viewpoint, the sudden switch to a fully online or hybrid teaching model was largely focused on capacity building at first – making sure products can handle the surge in use," says Stephan Geering, global privacy officer and associate general counsel at Anthology. "During the pandemic, many clients found it hard to find the time to prioritise security and privacy and had to trust their providers to get data protection and security right."

The regulatory framework around the issue of data protection must also be considered, as well as any upcoming changes. For the UK and the European Union, the UK GDPR and the EU GDPR apply across all sectors, while in the US there is more of a sector-specific approach. But in addition to established data protection regulations, there are also guidelines and ethical issues to take into account, specifically in terms of how they relate to edtech.

Getting the balance right

Edtech tools have unlocked a host of new opportunities for universities, allowing them to implement innovative teaching methods and reach previously under-represented student cohorts. But data protection and cybersecurity remain vital considerations. For many institutions, it's about striking a balance between having the ability to source and share personal data while ensuring it is used appropriately and protected by the necessary safeguards.

"This is where data protection officers and data protection programmes should come into effect at institutions," Geering says. "If you want to benefit from the really



"Collecting more data is not inherently good or bad. It's all about how it's being collected and used"

important insights that data can provide, you need to make sure you explicitly address the accompanying risks. Many of our clients have data protection teams in place but they don't always have the seniority or influence that you would typically see in the private sector. There's definitely scope for enhancement in this area."

Higher education providers should carefully consider their choice of vendor to bolster data protection around their edtech tools. "Clients should be demanding and make decisions based not only on pricing or functionality, but also on a data protection and security perspective," Geering says.

As with many other technological advances, it's important that institutions don't neglect the important role individuals play in the deployment of edtech solutions. "The human factor can be neglected with regard to security, perhaps because a lot of tech promises automation," Geering adds. "It's really important to make sure there's training and awareness about things like phishing, social engineering and malware threats."

Reasons for optimism

Although security issues will arise whenever a new digital technology is launched, these shouldn't cause universities to turn their backs on the kinds of solutions that saw rapid uptake in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic. "I'm optimistic regarding the future of edtech platforms," Geering says. "In the near term, there's going to be a lot more development

in this area, particularly in terms of helping clients utilise the data that they already have access to. A lot of our clients have a wide range of applications, but these don't necessarily talk to each other very well. We have been working on breaking down these data silos for our clients.

"From a regulatory or industry perspective, you are witnessing the number of data protection conferences growing day by day. Data protection is still quite a young field compared with security, so I think we will see more specialisation, more tools that automate aspects of data protection and increased demand from universities and students to hear what the collected data is being used for."

Data collection is not anything new in the higher education space – before the emergence of edtech solutions, educators were using grade sheets and attendance rosters to collect information about students. But, of course, this has ramped up significantly in recent years.

"Collecting more data is not inherently good or bad. It's all about how it's being collected and used," Geering says. "Data shouldn't be hoovered up indiscriminately but collected in a deliberate, considered manner that assesses whether each piece of data is really needed and what it is going to be used for. There's a lot of hugely important insights we can glean from edtech tools, but any data we collect needs to be processed in a way that prioritises compliance and transparency at all times."

How personalisation and intelligent experiences improve learning outcomes

By offering learning pathways that are tailored to the individual, institutions can better support students and create a more inclusive environment

It is becoming clear that personalisation in higher education is a trend that's here to stay. Greater personalisation has huge potential to enable universities to meet the changing demands of diverse cohorts and support different learners' needs. Louise Thorpe, vice-president and head of client experience for EMEA at Anthology, explains that there is a tension between offering personalisation and a collective university experience. "Students want to be part of a cohort experience, and institutions also need to be able to guarantee that each student has been through a process that adheres to a collective standard," Thorpe says.

"At a micro level, the way that institutions use their learning management systems provides numerous opportunities for personalisation," says Dolf Jordaan, deputy director of e-learning and media development at the University of Pretoria. "There are different learning paths you can integrate in your courses based on individual progress, for example."

"Personalisation can empower students by offering a tailored curriculum that meets their learning needs. And this is something that is particularly valuable at postgraduate level," says Richard Walker, head of programme design and learning at the University of York. "If you can have a

curriculum that, using diagnostic activities, can recognise strengths of individual students and areas to focus on, then we can build unique learning pathways."

Ultimately, data is key to ensuring personalisation leads to intelligent experiences and tangible outcomes for students. When dealing with a variety of pathways, data can enlighten institutions in terms of how students are performing, help students find the communities that best meet their interests, and add clarity to the assessment process. Without this data, personalisation risks creating a cacophony of choices that can overwhelm students and staff.

Data can support individual students, inform universities if intervention is

needed, and, when combined with the right form of analytics, it can help identify at-risk students. Data can also support effective course design. Rather than simply creating another pathway based on anecdotal evidence, greater data access means any decision an institution makes around personalisation has statistics underpinning it.

Serving diverse cohorts

Improving diversity and inclusion in the higher education space is increasingly being demanded by students, and research indicates that it holds benefits for learner outcomes. As universities have grappled with ways of better meeting the needs of a diverse student body,



"Personalisation can empower students by offering a tailored curriculum"



personalisation is seen as a powerful tool.

"Personalisation is partly about the pathways that institutions provide," Thorpe explains. "So, if you are a mature student, someone that has been in a particular industry for, say, 20 years, but is returning to education, there may not be much point in sitting through lectures on the basics of your field. Why not just take the assessment and if you don't pass, take some tutorials? I think personalisation can certainly open up opportunities for more non-traditional learners."

"Digital tools also simply provide more flexibility, which makes learning pathways more adaptable for different student needs. Pathways can be created to suit individuals with a disability, for example, but also with preferences that don't suit traditional pedagogical approaches. Encouraging diversity means meeting the needs of all learners."

"Personalisation needs to be applied in a structured way because, if not, it could actually entrench inequalities," warns

Joel Armando, senior client experience manager at Anthology. "If you don't work towards delivering a consistent experience for all students, then you might start to see different outcomes that simply reflect the inequalities of those joining your institutions. University services like mentoring, for example, need to be offered to ensure that students from diverse backgrounds have access to the support they need, even as they navigate their own pathways through the learning experience."

Entering the workplace

"Of course, it is not always easy to tailor education to individuals, but you are seeing this to a greater extent as education becomes more authentic and contextualised," Kazdal says. "This personalisation is also being offered as a competitive advantage. Higher education is becoming increasingly competitive, particularly in terms of the most talented students. For personalisation to attract

students that are focused on career outcomes, additional connections with industry need to be made."

As Kazdal suggests, personalisation at universities can be used to connect higher education with employment. Personalisation is a major trend in the workplace, being used to further engagement and encourage reskilling, just as it is at universities.

"I think personalisation needs to be viewed in the larger context of the world of work," Jordaan says. "While personalisation may have its value, students must be able to understand that there are times when they will need to fit into a larger collective, when they need to make a contribution to a group. In this sense, a group becomes an extended personalised environment. Universities need to manage a difficult balancing act between personalisation and standardisation."



Ensuring greater accessibility for all learners

Digital transformation in higher education has created new opportunities for the sector and can open doors for a diverse range of students while supporting lifelong access to learning

The shifts that have taken place in the higher education space in recent years have had contrasting effects in terms of student accessibility. While new digital solutions and teaching methodologies have, in theory, meant that learning can be delivered more flexibly – which should cater to more diverse geographies as well as students with more restrictive temporal needs – in practice, challenges around accessibility persist. There is hope, however, that higher education institutions in the EMEA region can broaden access to meet student needs, ensure digital equality and build a robust learning provision for the future.

Improving access

“Access to technology can prove a serious challenge, so it’s important that students have access to the right support,” says Joel Armando, product manager director for educators and the global client experience at Anthology. “Moving everything online actually makes accessibility more of a challenge because the barriers that exist with face-to-face learning are probably still going to be there, in addition to accessibility challenges related specifically to technology use. With international students, offering accessibility support is even more difficult.”

Fortunately, many institutions see improving access as a key ambition. Dolf Jordaan, deputy director of e-learning and media development at the University of Pretoria, states that access is his institution’s “number one goal”, and therefore the university views accessibility as an opportunity for improvement rather than a challenge. “The opportunity lies in taking the lessons we’ve learnt during the pandemic forward. How can we increase our online offering and stop thinking about access purely in terms of physical access?”

“At Anthology, accessibility is one of our priorities across our product portfolio,” Armando says. “In the five years since I’ve been at the company, institutions are taking accessibility more seriously, not only in terms of adopting the right technology but also working with faculty members to ensure that the content they are providing to students is accessible.”

“Accessibility is a benefit to every learner in terms of providing different formats and different ways of engaging

with content,” says Richard Walker, head of programme design and learning at the University of York. “There’s been a noticeable movement, not only towards technical development but also with regard to the usability side for bolstering accessibility, breaking content down into bite-size modules that are easier to digest and can support more flexible methods of course delivery.”

Scaling lifelong learning

As Armando states, accessibility has improved at EMEA institutions in recent times, but still has some way to go. In particular, there continues to be a disconnect between education and employment – one that accessibility can help bridge. Whether this is in the form of more flexible courses or microcredentials, universities are viewing their remit less in terms of a three-year degree course and more in terms of creating the right environment for lifelong learning.

“Of course, affordable, high-quality education remains a challenge across the world, but another issue is gaining access to education that is relevant for the job market,” Kazdal says. “I think this is increasingly a priority for students. It is about making sure they have access not just to knowledge but also skills, ones that give them the resilience and agility to thrive in the workplace.”

“In terms of accessibility, we have worked hard to ensure that nobody is prevented from accessing the full academic experience,” says Carlos Garriga, chief information officer at IE Business School. “Our institution has been focused on lifelong learning for some time now. The validity of whatever it is you are studying is getting shorter, so students need to refresh their skills more frequently. Edtech is key to this, allowing learners to access material depending on which stage of their professional life they are at.”

It’s clear that improving accessibility continues to be an important driver for many university staff. “We’re encouraging our staff to update their materials to make learning more accessible by curating resources so they are easy to maintain and, in this way, retain their relevance for future cohorts,” Walker says. “We’ve also been exploring alumni entitlements and rewards, providing our graduates with accessible learning resources that they can apply to workplace settings. Overall, I think accessibility should underpin everything we do.”

For both higher education institutions and edtech partners, accessibility is an important factor within the higher education space in the EMEA region. By improving this single aspect, institutions can grant more students access to the entire range of benefits that university life provides, regardless of their race, gender, geography, disability or any other characteristic.

As the industry moves to adopt a more flexible digital ecosystem of tools, rather than monolithic edtech systems, new challenges will emerge around integration, security and usability. But this is an exciting time for higher education, one where the focus should be on innovation, rather than hurdles. For the EMEA region, in particular, partnerships with other institutions around the world will provide opportunities to tackle digital poverty – both on a domestic and global scale – while encouraging attendance for more diverse student cohorts. And edtech will open doors at institutions that some learners may have once thought remained closed to them. Higher education should be for all who seek it.

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BRANDED CONTENT EDITOR
Ashton Wenborn

DESIGNER Steve Beech

CONTRIBUTOR Barclay Ballard

IMAGES Shutterstock

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branding@timeshighereducation.com

TIMES HIGHER EDUCATION
26 Red Lion Square, London WC1R 4HQ



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