The Live Chat and Chatbot Guide for Higher Education
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Introduction

Competition in higher education is as tough as it gets. The marketing efforts of higher educational institutions are proof enough of this. Institutions are increasing their marketing budgets in an effort to gain even the slightest bit of attention from a demographic that barely has any attention to give.

Millennials and Generation Z (born after 1981) are bombarded with advertising from almost every corner of their lives. Gen Z, the future generation of students, are particularly targeted as brands try to get a slice of their $143 billion spending power. On top of this, the attention span of a Millennial is said to be 12 seconds, and only 8 seconds for Generation Z.

To get this coveted attention, higher educational institutions must therefore do everything they can to meet students where they are and provide them with an experience that they have become accustomed to. Grown up immersed by technology, this means providing speed, accessibility, and convenience across digital mediums.

Live chat and AI are central to this. Live chat and chatbots give higher educational institutions the chance to connect with students where and how they like to communicate. Students can receive fast support that is easily accessible and convenient (as well as via mobile phone which 52% of Gen Z say is their most important internet device.) This is in complete contrast to their relationship with phone calls which this generation is notoriously hostile to.

Students are also most open to chatbots than any other demographic. Gen Z and Millennials are most likely to have used AI in customer service, and are more likely to agree that chatbots make it easier and quicker for their issues to get resolved.

This data clearly indicates a shift towards digital engagement that higher education must embrace if they want to connect with prospective and current students.

But how can higher educational institutions get started? Read on for a comprehensive guide to implementing live chat and chatbots as part of your student experience strategy.
Chapter 1: The consumer move to digital

Across every demographic, there is a consumer move away from phone and towards digital communication. 41% of today’s consumers prefer live chat support, versus 32% who prefer phone support. Even among digital communication, live chat tops the popularity contest, with 46% of customers preferring live chat, compared to 29% for email and 16% for social media.

For younger demographics, and students in particular, this preference runs even deeper. 52% of Millennials say they feel anxious about taking a phone call, and 60% of Gen Z say they ‘hate calling people’. Live chat eliminates this barrier to engagement and allows students to connect with them where they want – digitally.

“Our students are mostly 17, 18 or 19 years old, and they naturally find live chat very easy to use. It’s also very quick for them – they can hop on a chat, ask us a question, and have their answer in a minute – all from their mobile device. It’s the perfect channel to help us engage with them and give them the support they need.”

Derek Gaucher
Coordinator of IT Solutions,
Dawson College

Read the full Dawson College customer story
This dislike of phone is not the only reason for the popularity of live chat however. Here are some of the top reasons why students prefer using live chat to connect with higher educational institutions.

1. Speed

The speed at which students can ask a question and get an almost immediate answer is key to live chat’s popularity. Students have grown up in a digital world that has created a desire for instant gratification, and this has seeped into customer support. The real-time nature of live chat caters to this behavioral expectation. In fact, 71% of 16-24-year-olds believe that customer experience can be drastically improved by quick responses.

2. Convenience

Today’s students are digital-first, and digital-obsessed. According to a survey by Pew Research Center, 45% of Millennials say they are online “almost constantly”. That’s almost double the percentage who answered the same three years ago. Because live chat is easily accessed on any website, it’s incredibly convenient for students to use.

3. Supports multi-tasking

Over half of students prefer live chat for its ease-of-use while multitasking. Even when students must wait a minute for an answer, with live chat they can do something else in the meantime.

4. Preference for typing

Today’s students are incredibly accustomed to typing, and it is their preferred mode of communication. A study by Software Advice shows that 52% millennials would rather text than converse on the phone.

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Chapter 2: Benefitting the bottom line

In the previous chapter we took you through the top reasons why students prefer communicating via live chat and how it benefits them. However, student preference isn’t the only reason for live chat’s popularity and why educational institutions are going digital.

Institutions are also embracing live chat for its numerous business benefits, including high efficiency, increased productivity, and enormous return-on-investment (ROI).

Compare live chat to phone, one of the most common service and support channels. Phone support can be very costly, both in terms of toll charges and labor-per-call costs. On the other hand, Forrester research has shown that live chat is at least 17% – 30% cheaper than a phone call.

This is primarily because live chat enables your agents to help several visitors at one time. With proper training, experienced live chat agents can handle three or more chats simultaneously. This live chat benefit, called chat concurrency, translates into considerable savings in personnel costs as it allows a few live chat agents to serve the same number of clients as a larger team of phone support employees.

AI chatbots improve this efficiency even more. By setting up a chatbot within your live chat window, a large portion of queries can be resolved by the chatbot without any human involvement at all. Brands typically set up chatbots to answer the simple, repetitive questions so agents can spend more time on complex or sensitive queries that students often have.

Read more on chatbots in Chapter 4: Taking the next step with AI chatbots
Chapter 3: Live chat best practices

The type of experience a student receives from one brand will affect how they judge an experience with another, no matter the industry. In other words, today's students are likely to judge the customer support from their higher educational institution by comparing it to other experiences like ordering food online or booking a cab via a mobile app.

With these experiences now setting the bar for customer experience, educational institutions are no longer just competing with others in their industry – they're being compared to every digital experience that the student has ever had.

Live chat is the first step towards delivering a great student experience, but to really take advantage of this channel, you need to know how to use it and what student expectations are within this channel.

To help you do just this, we have pulled the key education metrics from our 2021 Live Chat Benchmark Report, alongside top live chat best practices, that will help you exceed your students’ digital expectations.

### Wait time

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<th>70 seconds</th>
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<td>Education</td>
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<td>Average</td>
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Wait times are key to any customer service team. From analysis of our 2021 Live Chat Benchmark Report, we found that live chat teams in the education sector have an average wait time of 70 seconds. This is far above the average of 35 seconds, and indicates that a lot needs to be improved to take this wait time down and provide a faster experience that students expect.
Here are some ways that higher educational institutions can reduce live chat wait times:

1. **Employ agent efficiency tools**

The first and easiest step to reduce wait times is to use efficiency tools within your live chat platform. Keyboard shortcuts, for example, can help agents respond faster by reducing navigation and typing. **Canned messages** take this a step further. Canned messages are pre-defined answers to frequently asked questions that agents can select without having to type out the full answer every time. This saves agent time and speeds up the conversation, so helping to reduce wait time.

2. **Agent-facing AI**

Comm100’s agent-facing AI, known as **Agent Assist**, monitors incoming conversations in real time and suggests the best answer to the agent. This keeps agents from having to search for answers, empowering them to deliver rapid-fire responses that have been vetted for accuracy.

3. **Encourage self-serve with a knowledge base – internal and external**

The more students that resolve their issue without agent support, the lower your wait times will be. This is known as self-serve, and the great news is that it is a popular and expected channel. In fact, **70% of customers expect a company’s website to include a self-service application.**

A **strong knowledge base** is core to self-serve and should be accessible on any site. Better still, integrate your knowledge base within the live chat window so when a student opens a chat, they can perform a knowledge base search within the chat window before they start a conversation. This helps to reduce the number of common queries coming through to your agents, and so contributes to lower wait times.
Chat duration

Chat duration varies widely across industries, primarily due to the nature of the conversation. In our Live Chat Benchmark Report, we discovered that chat duration within education live chat teams is far higher than the average at 18 minutes 53 seconds. This is also much higher than the previous year’s which was 10 minutes 30 seconds on average.

A lower chat duration obviously has its benefits, allowing agents to handle more agents in a given time. However, over the past year, we have seen a significant shift in priorities due to the growing emphasis on student and customer experience.

Partly due to the pandemic, managers have begun shifting value away from shorter chat duration in favor of developing relationships with students – and so allowing agents to take longer to resolve queries.

This is not to say that educational institutions should allow chat duration to rise too high – after all, we know that a key reason why students like live chat is for its speed. However, it does show that live chat teams are recognizing the need to balance speed with quality of service and showing students that they care. On the following pages are some top ways live chat teams can improve the student experience on live chat.
1. Video and audio chat

As we explained earlier, developing relationships with prospective and current students is crucial, and while live chat does this brilliantly, there’s another tool educational institutions can use within the live chat window to take this personalized customer service up a level – video chat.

Video chat brings students face-to-face with agents and helps them to connect on a more personal level. This is all the more helpful in the age of COVID as many universities and colleges remain closed. Dawson College faced this problem in the fall of 2020 and used Comm100 video chat as their solution.

In 2020, Covid-19 restrictions rendered Dawson College’s traditional open house event impossible. As an essential part of its enrollment strategy, administrators feared that without the event there would be a significant drop in enrollment.

In a moment of ingenuity, Dawson College came up with the idea of holding a virtual open house event through live chat, supported by video chat. The virtual open house took place over several days and saw almost 1000 students from 17 countries speak with hundreds of department reps. Video chat allowed department reps to develop a more personal connection with the students and begin building relationships that are always so important to the success of an open house event.

“Speaking with the students over video meant our college representatives had the chance to connect with the students on a more personal level, as if they were face-to-face. This is so important to developing relationships with the students and allowed us to recreate the experience of our typical, in-person open house events.”

Derek Gaucher
Coordinator of IT Solutions,
Dawson College

Read the full Dawson College customer story
2. Utilize data for a more personalized experience

Nobody likes being treated like they are just one of many, and students are no different. This is why personalization in live chat is key to delivering the very best student experience, and your agents can only do this if they have data at their fingertips.

With an intelligent live chat platform, your agents have access to a wealth of information about the student they are speaking to, especially if you integrate it with other core data systems like your CRM. With a unified agent console, your agents can instantly know who the student is, what they are studying, what year they are in, previous conversation history, and so much more – all without even asking. With all this information at hand, your agents can deliver the personalized, fully contextualized service your students want and expect.

3. Intelligent routing

A major reason why students dislike calling customer support via phone is being passed between agents, and having to repeat their query each time. To make sure that you avoid this typical phone complaint, you need to use a live chat platform that offers intelligent routing.

Intelligent routing allows you to direct chats based on pre-determined rules so that a student is always directed to the agent who is best able to resolve their question. Pre-chat surveys are key to this as they allow you to gain information about the visitor's query before they are routed to an agent. From here, you can make sure they are automatically directed to the right department, team, or even specific agent.

This provides a far smoother experience for the student, while also helping to reduce overall chat duration.
In 2020, 43% of live chats in the education sector were made on mobile. At first this figure may seem high because much of 2020 was spent at home due to COVID-19, which gave all of us greater access to desktops and laptops, making us less reliant on our mobile phones. However, this is actually 11% below the overall average, and suggests that secondary institutions have significant catch up to do in the adoption of mobile.

This is all the more important for educational institutions because their target audience is the highest users of mobile phone. See stats below.

All these stats reinforce the need for higher educational institutions to embrace mobile and ensure that their chat is optimized for mobile. Responsive design is key to this - when viewing a website on a mobile device, chances are it will look different than it does from your computer screen. The original chat button and chat window that were designed to fit your desktop browser might take up too much space on a smartphone, making it difficult to navigate your mobile website. With responsive design your live chat is automatically adjusted in size and layout with full mobile compatibility when visitors access your website through mobile devices. Without this, you risk providing frustrating and negative experiences when students are trying to reach out for support.
Chapter 4: Taking the next step with AI chatbots

Live chat support is the best channel to connect with students, but few higher educational institutions can afford to provide this support 24/7. So what can you do to be there for those international students, night owls, and weekend academics who want to connect with you out of your typical customer service hours? After all, 58% of Millennials expect to be able to connect with a company whenever they want to.

A chatbot is the perfect answer to this expectation. When your team is offline, a chatbot can step in to answer the students’ questions, as well as accomplish tasks for them – all without any human supervision, 24/7.

To be clear, there is a difference between chatbots and AI-powered chatbots. Chatbots that run on keywords and without the benefit of AI technology like Natural Language Processing (NLP) are common, easy to spin up, and can work well in the right context. However, chatbots that are powered by AI take the student experience up a level.

AI chatbots can engage in far more natural conversations; they’re far more accurate at understanding your students’ intentions, and as a result, can respond more effectively.

If you’re wondering where to start with chatbots, here are just a handful of use cases they can handle:

- **24/7 service**: Chatbots provide an additional channel for students to still get answers during off-hours so they can get assistance on their schedule, not yours.

- **FAQs**: Chatbots can handle common questions to free up your agents to handle the more complex or sensitive queries.

- **Gathering student information**: Chatbots can pass off the who, what, where, when, and why to an agent, helping them contextualize queries and reducing time spent on each question.

- **Shorter queues, faster responses**: Chatbots can handle an unlimited amount of chats simultaneously. They can also deliver responses more quickly than human agents.

One of the most important best practices for you to keep in mind is that a chatbot should never be a replacement for your agents. While 59% of all chats now involve a chatbot, 86% of customers agree that there should always be an ‘escalate to agent’ option present when talking to a chatbot.
Chapter 5: Stepping up a gear with Omnichannel

The ability to connect with students is crucial to developing relationships and improving the probability that they choose to enroll with you. It’s also vital to keeping them. Student drop-out is a huge issue across states and countries, and it has a huge impact on an institutions’ bottom-line. A study by Stanford showed that a student who leaves before graduating can cost an institution up to $40,000.

And while today’s students are digital-first, this doesn’t just mean that they prefer to connect with educational institutions through digital channels. This means that they have access to various digital channels and expect to be able to connect with them across all these channels – whether that’s live chat, email, social media (like Facebook, WhatsApp, and WeChat), or even SMS.

To make sure that prospective and current students can easily connect with them on whatever channel they prefer, education institutions must therefore seek out a digital omnichannel customer engagement platform that empowers this.

Omnichannel customer engagement conveniently unites conversations from every digital channel into a single agent console. Here, agents have access to a student’s entire history whether they are reaching out via live chat, SMS, email, messaging, or social media. This makes sure agents never lose the conversation thread, creating a cohesive experience for the student, as well as receiving genuine and personalized support.

With such high levels of competition within education, allowing students to connect how and when they want is more vital than ever.
Wrap up

When it comes to digital communication, are you meeting the expectations of today’s students? If you’re asking them to pick up the phone or send an email whenever they have a question, then the answer is ‘no’.

You need a more scalable digital solution. The good news is you can increase engagement and future-proof your needs at a cost far below what you’re used to seeing with phone-based solutions.

Comm100 Omnichannel Customer Engagement is ideal for higher education institutions. McMaster University, San Jose University, Open University, Dawson College, Thompson Rivers University, and many more are using Comm100 to take their customer service operations up a level.

With data centers located in Canada, the US, and Europe, and audited compliance including ISO 27001, SOC 2 Type 2, GDPR, CCPA, and more; only Comm100 can meet your complete security and compliance requirements.
Comm100 is a leading global provider of omnichannel customer experience solutions with a mission to make online service and support delivery more genuine, more personalized, and more productive through meaningful conversations. Let us show you how.