Ten years of learning from student engagement at the University of Essex



The University of Essex first piloted Kortext stream in 2017 as part of its ambition to use data to support student success, before rolling it out more widely across the university.

Almost a decade on, Essex's experience offers practical lessons for others, from recognising changes in engagement to turning insight into effective student support.

Look for changes, not just low engagement

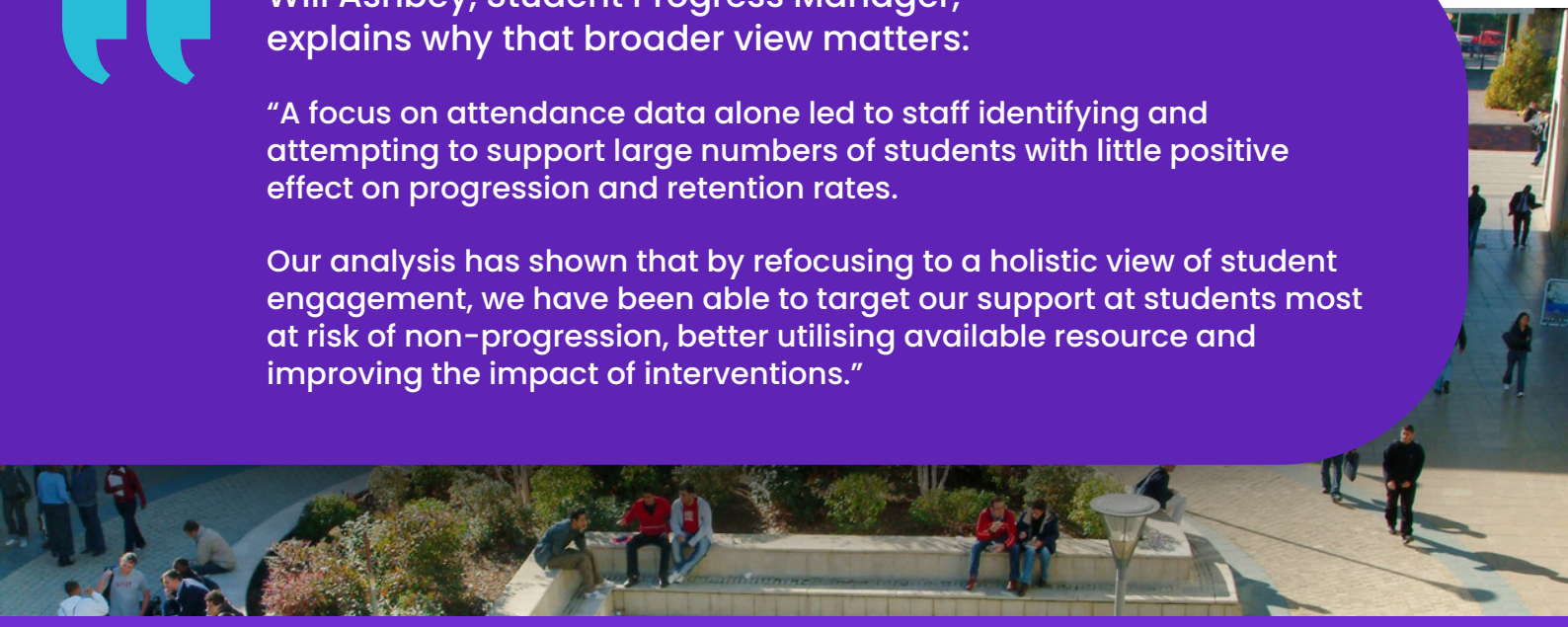
No single measure can provide a complete picture of student engagement.

At Essex, staff take a more holistic view, bringing together multiple indicators to understand engagement patterns over time. Rather than interpreting individual events in isolation, staff can ask a more useful question: what has changed?

Will Ashbey, Student Progress Manager, explains why that broader view matters:

"A focus on attendance data alone led to staff identifying and attempting to support large numbers of students with little positive effect on progression and retention rates.

Our analysis has shown that by refocusing to a holistic view of student engagement, we have been able to target our support at students most at risk of non-progression, better utilising available resource and improving the impact of interventions."



University of Essex

Kortext Est 2013

Not every student who needs support looks disengaged

Essex's experience has highlighted the importance of recognising students whose engagement may be 'flatlining'.

A student whose engagement is 'flatlining' may still be:

- attending classes
- submitting assessments
- interacting with university systems.

At the same time, subtler changes may be emerging:

- plateauing engagement
- less frequent interaction with learning resources
- a gradual decline in activity.

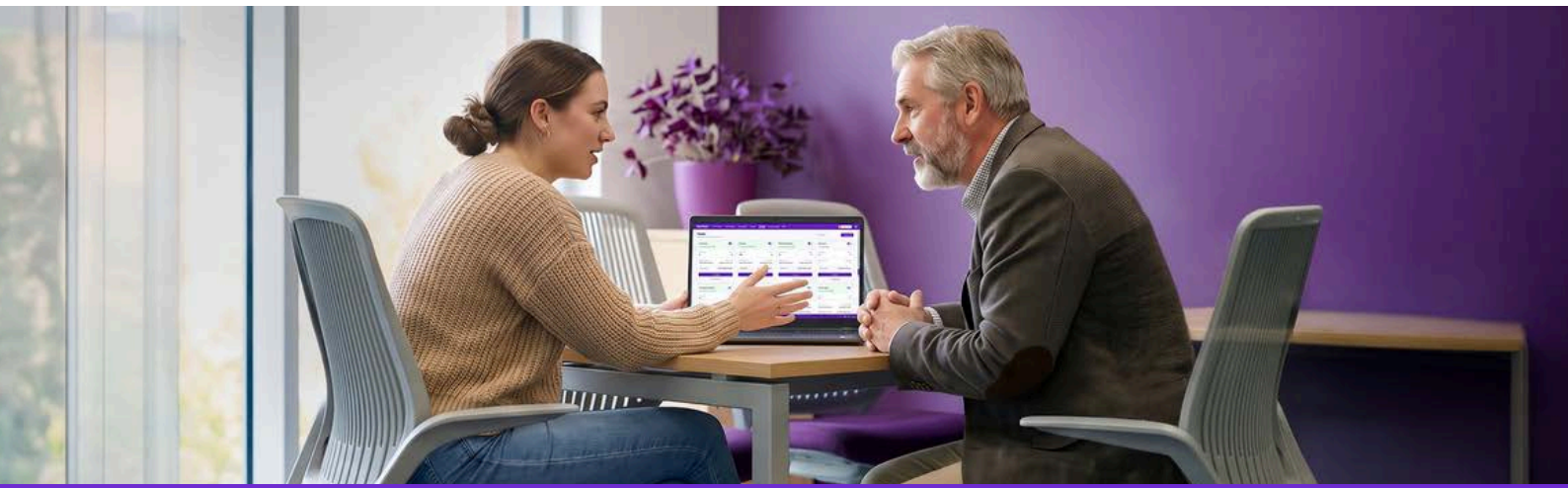
Because these shifts can be subtle, students may not immediately stand out as needing support. Looking at their engagement trajectory over time can help staff identify where a conversation may be valuable before disengagement becomes more pronounced.

Use data to start conversations earlier

Recognising that a student may benefit from support is only the starting point.

For Essex, the timing of that support matters. Reaching out earlier can uncover issues that might otherwise remain hidden until they affect academic progress.

Their analysis has shown a strong correlation between early intervention and progression. The university has found that week six of the academic year provides enough data to understand engagement patterns, while still giving staff time to act.



What happens next relies on human judgement: contacting the student, understanding what may be happening and deciding what support, if any, is appropriate.

> **"The key to early intervention is in building a positive relationship with a student, opening channels of communication and following up periodically to ensure students feel supported as they progress through their study," says Will.**

Essex has also developed a tiered approach to alerts and interventions, ranging from early supportive communications to more direct engagement as concerns escalate.

Make communication personal

How staff contact students can be just as important as the decision to reach out.

Students may receive a high volume of communications from the university. Essex has found that generic or automated messages can be easily overlooked, particularly when they do not feel relevant to the student's experience.

Instead, the university focuses on making its messages more personal, explaining why the student is being contacted and how support can help. Short, direct messages can also be easier to absorb, particularly when read on a mobile device.

> **As Will explains: "We feel that students respond best to personalised alerts. Automated messages are easy to ignore, but personalisation provides the human touch that may be the difference between a student reading and taking action or ignoring the message."**

Coordinate support around the student

Effective student support rarely sits within a single team.

At Essex, responsibility is shared between academic departments, Student Support Leads, specialist services and the Student Progress Team.

Rather than passing students between services, teams coordinate support around each student's primary need, involving the right people at the right time.

> Where possible, that starts with someone the student is familiar with. "We've tried to ensure that the first line of support for a student is someone they know and have a personal relationship with, such as an Academic Advisor," says Will.

This joined-up approach, informed by engagement data, creates a more consistent experience for students while helping staff avoid duplication of effort.

Ten years of learning

Almost a decade of experience at Essex shows that effective use of engagement data goes beyond identifying where support may be needed.

It means understanding how engagement is changing, recognising when to act and using that context to inform the right response.

There is no fixed formula. Data can provide the signal, but its value comes from how staff interpret it and what happens next: timely conversations, human judgement and support shaped around the individual student.

Explore the original University of Essex case study

Discover how Essex established its approach to student engagement analytics and used Kortext stream to support data-informed decision-making and student support.

Read the full case study on the Kortext stream website

