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Open University - improving its student registration experience through rapid contact centre transformation



'Dimension Data provided us with **support at a critical time**. They supported the **recovery of service and ensured the successful recruitment of students.**'

Phil Berry, Deputy Director - Strategy and Operations, Open University



Challenge

- Open University wanted to increase efficiency in their contact centre to better serve its over 250,000 students.
- the UK-based university wanted to be able to handle the twice-yearly seasonal flux of student registration.
- the university also wanted to convert new prospects into registered students as timeously as possible to remain commercially viable.

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Solution

- end-to-end service recovery plan for contact centre
- streamlined workforce management systems
- successful recruiting and training of resources
- increased operational resource availability
- proactive outbound campaign management

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Result

- inbound forecast within 3% variance of target volumes
- 50% increase in timeous call response rate
- 50% decrease in abandoned call rate

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Challenge

The Open University, in the UK, is a distance learning university and one of the largest universities for undergraduates in the country. As most of its 250,000 students study off-campus, it relies on its contact centre as its main touchpoint, especially when it comes to seasonal fluxes in student registration.

As tuition fees were set to increase, due to changes in government funding, the university faced a challenge. It had to let existing students know to register in time to stay on the current fee rate — if not, they would have to face higher fees. At the same time, there was also a push to convert new students to the university, which was important if it was to stay commercially viable.

These two factors proved to create a perfect storm. It led to poor service levels in its contact centre during the 'registration race' in March and April. While there would be some respite after this constrained two-month period, it knew it would again see a swell of contact volumes at the registration close-off in August and September.

The university wanted to evolve its contact centre to be able to handle the peaks-and-troughs in registration. It believed it could deliver a better experience to both student and employees, but it would have to make these improvements before the autumn rush.

[► Back to summary ...](#)

Solution

Dimension Data in the UK collaborated with the university to analyse, plan, and develop a progressive solution for its contact centre. This would provide short-term interventions and, more important, prepare for the upcoming busy period. It would also deliver a better user experience for those calling into the contact centre.

Our experts in customer experience (CX) were asked to carry out a one-day on-site assessment. This engagement helped identify a support 'triage' in April. It also defined a long-term approach — with a focus on workforce and capacity planning, as well as protecting service levels in the future.

Dimension Data soon became a valued partner to the university during a time of transformation. Starting in April, we provided an interim workforce management consultant and director at the contact centre. This team would see the project through until completion. It included day-to-day management, as well as coaching and upskilling. We also assisted in the recruitment of a full-time workforce manager, and developing a new workforce system for the university.

During this time, real- and near-time actions were put in place to increase contact rates with students. This involved a 'leave buy-back' incentive programme to bolster resource availability. It also included interactions with contact centre agents and other back-office teams. We also worked at optimising resources ahead of peak periods.

While the university had a long-term recruitment strategy in place, we helped refine this plan. The university needed a stronger view of its skills across all business areas, so it could recruit the right talent in time for the pressures looming in August and September.

Just as important as the recruitment plan, was a grade-of-service recovery plan. In the event of service degradation, the contact centre still had to run as efficiently as possible. Employee productivity and a better student experience were always top of mind for both Open University and Dimension Data. This plan included actions that the operations manager in the contact centre could take; it also assigned thresholds against each service level.

We were also asked to create a specialised, proactive outbound campaign in order to deflect inbound contact volumes.

[► Back to summary ...](#)

 Result

With a robust plan in place, the university was more prepared for peak registration periods. It was now able to register students with less glitches and in less time. All levels of management — from executive to operational — had in their hands a clear and actionable plan to execute with confidence. Once this plan was finalised, inbound forecasts fell within a 3% variance to the actual targets.

It was clear that Open University had the right team in place for the future success of its contact centre. This would help the project to go from build to transfer stage, with handovers and tactical plans firmly in place.

The contact centre had an 80% target rate for calls answered within 20 seconds. Before its transformation, this rate was just 20%. After, the rate was 70%. Furthermore, the contact centre had 6% target rate for abandoned calls. Before, this rate was 16%. After, this rate was 8%.

'Dimension Data provided us with support at critical time,' says Phil Berry, Deputy Director of Strategy and Operations at Open University. 'They supported the recovery of service and ensured the successful recruitment of students.'

► [Back to summary ...](#)

Solutions delivered

- contact centre consulting assessment
- workforce management
- recruitment
- inbound service recovery
- outbound campaign management

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