Webinar: Scaling student support with Microsoft AI solutions

This webinar explores how student support in further and higher education must evolve from fragmented contact centres to unified, AI-enabled service models. Driven by retention pressures, student expectations, and financial constraints, institutions are adopting Microsoft-based platforms to integrate data, automate queries, and improve personalisation. AI enhances speed and scale, while humans retain oversight for sensitive, complex student needs.

Setting the Context: Why Student Support Must Change

The discussion opened by reframing contact centres not as technology platforms, but as student service operating models designed to solve institutional challenges.
Across further and higher education, institutions are shifting focus from recruitment and delivery to retention, continuation, and student outcomes.

Three key pressures are driving this:

- Regulation and accountability – retention and completion are now formally measured
- Financial sustainability – student dropouts directly impact income
- Student expectations – demand for instant, digital-first, consistent support

Current models are often fragmented, with disconnected channels, limited visibility, and no consistent triage, particularly under peak demand such as enrolment.
The core issue is not just technical, but behavioural: when students cannot access support easily, they disengage or drop out.

From Contact Centre to Student Service Model

Modern student support must shift from reactive communication to proactive lifecycle engagement.

Rather than simply handling queries, institutions should support students across:

- Recruitment and admissions
- Active study
- Support and wellbeing
- Alumni engagement

The real value comes from improving routing, reducing friction, and enabling faster resolution, not by increasing staffing levels, but by redesigning the operating model.

Technology is an enabler, not the starting point.

Microsoft's Unified Platform Approach

The Microsoft perspective focused on delivering student support through a single, connected platform, enabling institutions to meet students where they are.
Using Microsoft technologies including:

- Microsoft Dynamics 365
- Microsoft Azure

Institutions can:

- Deliver omnichannel engagement (chat, SMS, social, voice)
- Unify data and automation
- Provide real-time insights for faster resolution

Key principle: AI is only as strong as the data behind it. Fragmented systems limit performance and increase cost.

Many universities currently spend heavily on maintaining disconnected systems rather than investing in innovation.

What Good Looks Like: A Connected Student Journey

A modern model connects every touchpoint into one ecosystem:

- Students interact via preferred channels
- AI provides instant self-service
- Complex issues are escalated seamlessly to human staff
- Staff receive full context and student history in real time

This reduces complexity and enables:

- Faster resolution times
- Lower operational cost
- Improved student experience across the full lifecycle

Importantly, institutions do not need to rip and replace existing systems, integration can sit on top of current infrastructure.

Live Demonstration Highlights

A live demo illustrated how a student query might flow through the system:

- A student asks: "When is my next lecture?"
- AI identifies the student via their contact record
- The system queries timetable data
- A personalised response is generated instantly

If the student cannot attend:

- The system updates attendance records
- Notifies relevant staff automatically
- Triggers downstream workflow actions

For complex issues (e.g. financial difficulty):

- The AI escalates to a human advisor
- A case is automatically created
- Staff receive full student context, including history and prior interactions

The system also demonstrated:

- Real-time multilingual translation
- Case summarisation
- Integrated student journey timeline
- Multi-channel engagement (SMS, chat, web, social)

Human + AI Collaboration

A key theme was the balance between automation and safeguarding.
AI should not independently handle sensitive areas such as:

- Mental health support
- Financial hardship decisions
- Safeguarding concerns

Instead, systems must:

- Apply strict routing rules
- Escalate appropriately to human teams
- Ensure deterministic behaviour in sensitive scenarios

This ensures both safety and trust in AI-enabled services.

Knowledge, Data, and AI Readiness

A key challenge is keeping knowledge bases accurate and current.
Approaches discussed included:

- Using website content as a live knowledge source
- AI-assisted knowledge agents that identify gaps
- Human validation to ensure accuracy

This avoids outdated or inconsistent responses and improves system reliability.
The importance of a single source of truth ("golden record") was emphasised to support personalisation and accurate routing.

Personalisation and System Integration

Personalisation is enabled through:

- Student record systems (e.g. UCAS, SIS platforms)
- Unified identity mapping
- Data orchestration via cloud architecture

Once data is unified, institutions can:

- Personalise communications by student profile
- Tailor support based on lifecycle stage
- Trigger proactive engagement (e.g. events, open days)

Q&A Highlights

Q: How is personalisation achieved?
Personalisation depends on unified data and a system of truth. Once student identity is resolved, systems can dynamically tailor responses and journeys.

Q: How do we keep knowledge up to date?
Knowledge can be:

- Linked to live web content
- Enhanced with AI-generated suggestions
- Managed with human oversight for validation

Q: Do we need digital workers or agents?
AI agents can now handle orchestration more directly, reducing reliance on traditional Power Automate workflows. However, the right architecture depends on cost, scale, and organisational maturity.

Q: What about AI limitations and risk?
Sensitive scenarios must always be routed to humans. AI should be constrained through rules and escalation logic to avoid inappropriate responses.

Final Thoughts

The webinar concluded that institutions are moving towards a hybrid model of AI + human service delivery, where:

- AI handles scale and speed
- Humans handle judgement and care
- Unified data enables personalisation
- Contact centres evolve into strategic student service hubs

Successful adoption depends not on full automation, but on careful design, governance, and phased implementation aligned to institutional priorities.

We hope you enjoyed this webinar. Please feel free to explore our other videos or get in touch if you have any questions about our exploration sessions.