

Teaching Gen Z

Generation Z, or Gen Z for short, is quickly beginning to represent the largest cohort of students at universities around the world. Chloe Lane finds out whether this new batch are snowflakes, tech-addicts, or simply just misunderstood.



addicted to technology, low attention spans, snowflakes: these are just a few ways Generation-Z have been described in the media recently. However, according to the lecturers who teach them, these labels couldn't be more wrong.

"It's intensely annoying to see phrases such as snowflake banded about," says Professor Paul Wiltshire, a journalism course leader and senior lecturer at the University of Gloucestershire in the UK.

"In the last two years [throughout the COVID-19 pandemic], this generation has shown huge creativity, resilience and sacrifice."

Generation-Z, often shortened to 'Gen Z', are the generation born between 1997 and 2012. Currently, this includes university students aged between 18 and 24.

Professor Sunita Malhotra teaches on the CEMS Master in International Management (MIM) at Louvain School of Management in Belgium.

"I love teaching Gen Z students and hope I never have to stop teaching them," she says.

"As a truth-seeker myself, I want to make the world a better place and believe in individual expression, so Gen Z's values are extremely close to mine."

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Engaging Gen Z students

According to Vision Critical, the average Gen Z student has an attention span of just eight seconds. Despite this, Pew Research has found them to be the most educated generation yet, with around 57 percent of university-age students enrolling in higher education, compared to 52 percent of Millennials and just 43 percent of Gen X.

With such a supposedly low attention span, teaching students to the expected high standard should pose challenges, but Professor Malhorta believes this statistic doesn't account for student engagement.

She says if a student is interested in what they are learning, they will have the passion to fully engage in the material.

"Rather than having a short attention span, Gen Z students want to be engaged, valued, and listened to as individuals within their learning," she says.

Gen Z also crave flexibility, explains Professor Malhorta. They don't want to be stuck in a monotonous 9-to-5 job, and instead crave passion and purpose in their work.

Dr Louise Robson, a senior university teacher at the University of Sheffield's School of Biosciences in the UK, also challenges the statistics on attention spans. She tells *QS-GEN* that in her 25 years of teaching experience, she's found Gen Z have a similar attention span to any other generation of student.

"If a lecture involves an academic standing at the front of a large lecture hall and talking at a group of students for 40 minutes, the attention span in the room will understandably wane, whether the students are Gen Z or not," she says.

Using digital teaching methods

To avoid drops in attention spans, Dr Robson has changed the way she teaches, using technology alongside traditional lectures to encourage students to play an active role in the learning process.

As class sizes continue to increase year-on-year, she's found using technology helps large groups of students to feel more engaged and creates a supported learning community.

The University of Sheffield's hybrid teaching and learning platform Echo360 enables Dr Robson to create video recordings for students before class. During the lecture, she uses the platform to drop anonymous polls and open questions to keep students engaged.

It seems Gen Z students feel incredibly comfortable using technology. According to Global News, Gen Z spend approximately 10 hours online each day.

"Gen Z are truly digital natives," explains Professor Malhorta. "Digital is part of who they are, and they have never had to learn it."

Professor Malhorta has also made the switch to digital learning, finding it a much more effective and interactive method of teaching than traditional lectures.

"I rarely use slides and if I do, it is just a few to introduce the concept. Quizzes, collaborative whiteboards such as Miro, and resources that are colorful, visual, and engaging also work brilliantly," she says.

Professor Wiltshire often uses social media platform TikTok in his journalism lectures, as well as online learning tools such as Padlet and Socrative to collaborate, seek opinions, and reinforce learning.

"Each year we embed social media more intensively into assessments and our teaching. TikTok has been a particular focus in the last year," he says.

The length of TikTok's videos are 60 seconds or less, but Professor Wiltshire and his colleague Sophie Flowers often use them in modules as explainer videos and in their news day social media output.

"We also get our first-year students to look at how journalists use TikToks as virtual CVs," he said.



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Changing the way students are assessed

It isn't just lectures that are becoming more technological. The pandemic has encouraged change from the traditional exams and essay assessment methods, reveals University of Sheffield's Dr Robson. As a result, assessment methods are now a lot more diverse than they were 10 or 20 years ago.

Dr Robson explains that the type of assessment she sets depends on the year-group of the student. For example, for first year students, lectures involve multiple choice quizzes, data-analysis tasks, or oral presentations, which help them assess the basic subject knowledge and understanding.

However, in second and final year, lecturers are looking for a higher level of critical analysis.

"We find open book problem solving assessments are a great way to ensure students have developed the key skills they need to use to succeed in their chosen fields once they start their

careers," says Dr Robson.

Similarly, Dr Malhorta is trying to move away from the traditional assessment methods to engage students and interest them in the subject.

"I'm a firm believer in not setting drawn-out, complex exams. It is better to assess students in fun creative ways, which accurately capture their passion for the subject," explains Professor Malhorta.

Dr Malhorta's CEMS students run a cross-cultural leadership fair and online exhibition as part of their assessment. She thinks this method of assessment is a lot more beneficial to students than the traditional exam format.

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When reviewing students' performance in these assessments, Dr Malhorta rewards creativity and always makes sure to give personalised qualitative feedback.

While teaching his journalism students, Professor Wiltshire tries to move away from academic writing as much as possible, preferring to encourage journalistic writing instead.

Instead of traditional essay assignments, many of Professor Wiltshire's assessments involve building students' portfolios, with online stories, social media shorts, videos, podcasts, and presentations. He also uses quizzes as part of the formative assessment.

Helping students find solutions to complex global issues

Ultimately, Gen Z students want to be passionate about what they're studying and understand the reason for studying it.

"Gen Z students have a keen interest in finding solutions to many of the world's greatest challenges, from climate change to sustainability, equality, and

diversity," says Dr Robson.

At the University of Sheffield, sustainability has been embedded into the curriculum as a direct result of conversations with students. Dr Robson encourages higher education professionals to talk directly with students about what they want from university curriculums.

Gen Z also has a stronger interest in certain subjects, such as technology, climate change, social justice, and world issues, adds Professor Malhorta.

"It is rare I sit with a Gen Z student and do not have a philosophical discussion of some kind. The key if you are preparing something as a teacher is to make sure you add in cases that address the issues of today," she says.

For journalism course leader, Professor Wiltshire, the challenge is finding new ways of approaching these important issues and approaching them as journalists.

"We very much teach in short bursts, with frequent breaks and changes of pace," says Professor Wiltshire.

Avoiding stereotypes

As with any generation, there is a tendency to generalise and stereotype. In reality, each student is different and will learn in different ways, explains Professor Malhorta.

"Every individual is different based on upbringing, culture, and values, so it is not as simple as dividing generations into categories according to year of birth," she says.

Although certain generations can share certain interests and views, it is only by spending time with each student that you can find out who they are and how they like to be taught.

Overall, all three lecturers enjoy teaching Gen Z students.

"I absolutely love teaching Gen Z students" says Professor Wiltshire

"It's a huge privilege to be let into their lives, and to see them grow in confidence and skills over the time they are with us.

"They can occasionally be frustrating, but they are always fascinating, and always keen to be the best versions of themselves possible," he adds. ♦