

Four steps to dealing with academic call centres at crunch time

 By [Bruce von Maltitz](#)

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Without doubt, South Africa's academic institutions are following the global trend toward digitisation - and as such are becoming increasingly sophisticated and streamlined in their offering.

In making the shift to online, however, many local institutions are failing to ensure that their interaction and customer service experience with students matches the sophistication of the education itself. This failing becomes more apparent in the peak periods of the academic season, such as when exam results are due, payments need to be made, or students are registering.

However, with new and advanced [technology solutions](#), such as cloud-based platforms and services, the challenge can quite easily be addressed.

Here are four steps that can mitigate the stress of the peak periods and ensure that the customer experience for students is both seamless and efficient.

1. Understand the extent of the problem before you tackle it

The first step is to understand exactly what you're dealing with. Do you have a clear picture of how many students are actually trying to reach your call centre to get results, register or make payments, during peak periods? Knowing how many calls were lost and dropped is just as important as knowing how many calls were handled. Also knowing why students are calling and how many are repeat calling, is crucial in understanding the extent of the problem.



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To gain a comprehensive view into these spikes and trends, you need to have a proper system in place that will enable you to prepare beforehand. With this system, you can also put appropriate SLAs (Service Level Agreements) in place, that ensure you can meet your requirements and have the right number of agents to deal with increased call volumes.

2. Match skills and expertise to queries via various media types

Once you have gained a real understanding of what to expect and what specifically students are calling about, you need to plan accordingly by matching the skills and expertise of agents to the nature and channel of each query. For example, some queries might be best to respond to purely online - either through email or social media channels, as long as agents are properly equipped to communicate via these digital channels.

Other queries can be handled by sending an SMS, while some may require the expertise of an agent over the phone. In some instances, callers can simply be directed to the Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) section on your website. The ultimate goal is to achieve First Call Resolution (FCR) and prevent any repeat calling.

3. Upskill staff

To achieve the holy grail of FCR, you need to have the right people in the right place, who are able to provide the appropriate answers via the right channels. In some instances, this may require training agents to become more proficient in digital communications - such as email, web chat, or social media, for example.

If agents are adept at using these channels, and can solve queries online, call volumes can be reduced - while simultaneously freeing up those agents who still need to speak to customers over the phone to handle more complex requests. By ensuring that agents have the right skills and expertise, you can divert customers to various channels more efficiently - and with better results. You might also consider upskilling back office staff to handle certain calls during peak periods.

4. Be flexible in your approach

By harnessing new tools and technology, such as [cloud-based platforms](#), you can explore additional ways of handling high volumes and busy periods. For example, you can re-route calls and make use of home-based or remote agents during busy times. The key benefit of cloud-based technology is that you can scale up or scale down according to your current needs, and only pay for the functionality you use at any given time. This model enables academic call centres to equip themselves for busy periods, without being locked into contracts that prove unsustainable and expensive in the long-term.

ABOUT BRUCE VON MALTITZ

Bruce von Maltitz is currently the MD of 1Stream, a cloud-based contact centre technology provider. He has over 20 years experience in the service industry focusing specifically on contact centres for the last twelve years. He has a detailed understanding of how to design, build and operate contact centres having worked in the industry in SA, Africa and abroad.

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