

## Learning & Teaching @ Newcastle Podcast

### **Supporting Student needs and wellbeing throughout the pandemic**

Welcome to a learning and teaching at Newcastle University podcast. I'm Kevin and I'm your host this week.

Today, we will be talking to Sandy Alden, team leader within the university's disability specialist learning team.

And Dr Louisa Wakeling, a senior lecturer at the School of Dental Sciences, all about the student support plan at the university and how it has changed since the pandemic.

In this episode, we will explore how the university adapted to teaching students with additional learning support,

disabilities or conditions at the start and throughout the pandemic. And we talk about what the future of learning looks like.

First up,

we look at what measures the university took at the start of the pandemic to ensure all students were supported with a switch to online learning.

Here's Sandy's view. What we did immediately was to actually explore and move some of our essential human supports online.

So typically, you kind of note takers, readers study skills or specialist mentoring.

So those provisions that typically always took place in person,

especially a note take and we had to actually set up a brand new procedure with NUIT to actually look at how we could integrate our support

staff into that community and set them up with university I.D. and then get them added to modules etc, so that was a big task.

But that was one of their most immediate things that we did straight away for students

to try and make sure that that consistency of support was still available to them, even though we switched to complete remote learning and working.

We did actually realized quite quickly that switched to kind of that whole online learning, that remote access was very kind of nuanced.

The needs were nuanced amongst different, different students. So, you know,

we learned an awful lot through remote working and learning about students who we thought

would actually potentially find this an easier mode of learning and easier to engage, to be able to self-select how long you might actually pace and engage with a pre-recorded lecture, for example, if it wasn't alive delivered lecture.

But actually, we discovered that a lot of students, you know, this was isolating their normal ways of working disappeared overnight.

That kind of typical thing to roll up to a lecture where you might have done a bit of pre kind of

outline and understand what it was going to be about to sit and absorb the kind of 50 minutes,

one hour lecture, have that very informal conversation with your peers to kind of help stop that consolidation process.

So that all kind of disappeared. So we ended up actually providing much more one on one support to a lot of students

that we didn't anticipate and that spanned right the way through all forms,

all of those lockdown situations that shift to online learning through the first time.

And then when we moved more alone again a second time. So, yeah,

we had to look at our resource and repurpose and reshape how we delivered support to meet need for those students who really

felt the isolation and the loss of strategies and coping mechanisms that they typically employed when they attended in person,

which was which was interesting.

And that was something that was very what she does being picked upon by the Disabled Students Commission in a recent report,

they've kind of reflected on those experiences and the impact, of COVID19.

And we uncovered those different experiences, some positives, negatives very early on.

So it was good to see that, you know, what we experienced was experienced nationwide by students.

The other key things that we've really focussed on and were involved in was actually liaison with colleagues in which more detail. So some teaching

colleagues would come to us directly and look at, you know, what's the best thing that we need to think about?

This is what our thoughts are. Are we being inclusive enough?

You know, the way that we're designing our assessment and teaching and learning, which was brilliant.

So I think it offered greater cooperation.

And we've certainly worked with the learning teach development teams to create resources that were meeting needs of colleagues, and staff in supporting students.

And I think that was something that we wouldn't have anticipated that we've been involved in in the detail that we have been,

which has been fantastic, that actually we've had that other avenue to,

you know, create resources to look at, you know, impacts, you know,

things to think about when you design in an inclusive approaches for all students, not just students with disabilities.

And then on a more kind of softer level, really promoting our kind of pastoral supports.

So certainly our chaplaincy teams really stepped up along with our student wellbeing advisors that we had placed and a small number of schools at that point.

We've now widened the provision and they were really reaching out to students and haven't in some cases,

those kind of weekly pastoral calls to just check in and find out how how students were getting

on and then promoting external online support such as Talk Compass and our CBT programs, -

Silver Cloud. So this kind of online provision. So we're really looked holistically.

But as you said, the unexpected that we're involved in a really welcome date was greater collaboration with colleagues across the institution.

How we could work together for solutions. And Louisa, from the view of an academic.

How did you adapt your teaching to benefit all students? The only area where I really had awareness of online teaching was in the postgraduate arena.

I hadn't really seen anywhere around large scale sort of delivery for undergraduates, which is what I mainly do for first year in the dental school.

And really there wasn't really that much resource out there that I could find to understand what I should do for all of our students.

Never mind students who needed additional support as well. So at the time, I mean, academic Twitter was on fire.

It was great. You know, we had loads of sort of ideas coming through that and lots of experts who had,

you know, taught online for a few years giving out some ideas for best practice.

So that was a really good source of information for us. And I also took some ideas from the post graduate practice as well.

One of the things, I think the key message really that came out for me with respect to online recording for your content was, was actually the shorter the better.

So I then looked at my lectures and scrutinize them and thought, right, how can I make it more digestible for students?

So I went about delivering those in small chunks.

So I was looking to sort of record videos that were really no more than, five to about 10 minutes long.

So I set about doing that. And that seemed to be sort of the general consensus with online attention span as well at the time.

Suppose we had the adoption of the new virtual learning environment.

Canvas, which actually brought with it quite a lot functionality, which which was quite good,

obviously was a steep learning curve too to understand that platform,

but it was quite accessible and actually it had some really good tools to ensure that my material was accessible as well,

and that the built in accessibility checker on all your documents, you know, pretty much told me immediately and with a red scale.

If that document wasn't accessible so I could go back in and instantly in and

add appropriate Headings and alt text and things like that to ensure that,

you know, the documents that I was applauding were accessible.

I suppose other considerations I had to make when I was actually making my recordings of my lectures was that I added a small video of my face.

And I kind of originally did that because I thought, oh, well,

they're not going to know who I am and these students because I'm obviously not teaching in person.

But also the fact that I know from being in the lecture theatre, students will come and sit at the front.

And I can tell that they are doing a bit of lip reading, actually.

So I thought it was important that students could see my face online.

But more importantly, see my lips move. And then as well, just ensuring that adequate headsets and with a good quality microphone.

I think it just all helps with this or the clarity of that recording.

And throughout the time when we would get student feedback,

when our recordings weren't clear and actually they told us about the difficulty to engage with a recording when you can't really hear it very well.

And all those sorts of things are so important.

Another thing we had to think about was, OK, I've got all these lectures and how do we package that now into learning?

You know, students are just showing up on a daily basis. According to the timetable.

But now it was a very different thing. You know, they could do these in their own time.

How do we structure the learning? How do you package that for them at that time?

I got myself into a bit of coding on canvas.

So using the html function, which which was a little bit daunting at first things, which I mean, I'm not very familiar with.

But actually once I realized that the word templates online that you could use and you know,

once you got once you got the hang of it actually wasn't too bad.

And this allowed me to sort of do things on the canvas pages where I could emphasize sections.

So if there was a particular task that needed to be done prior to further learning that I could I could put a big sort of a warning button,

but just highlight and button it, you know, in lots of different colours and things.

And actually getting into that code opened up a lot more function and I could set my pages of

PIN tabs and it just meant that the page wasn't overly long and students aren't having to scroll.

You know, you could go through each bit of my lecture in these tabs and then actually at the end I could include a tab on the learning

outcomes and then I would have a tab on a mini quiz at the end and it just helped structure the learning a lot better.

But hopefully, you know, the functionality was there actually to help our students and particularly those with additional needs.

So as we start to adapt to life back on campus, which provisions that were put into place

during the pandemic proved useful to students who require additional support. And are you continuing to use them?

I think it was, you know, it was a rapid shift. But actually being able to offer blended approaches, you know, it was an online, purely online.

To begin with, but actually, you know, we've discovered, which is what I mentioned earlier.

You know, the shift to online suited students better than it did others.

And for those students where it actually supported their health,

long term health or disability, thinking of students with fluctuating conditions where, you know, there might be fatigue, the physical challenges of actually travelling on to campus, remote options really support those students.

So for us as a service that's allowed us to create a blended model of delivery in our, you know,

our appointment meetings with students that first initial let's have a chat, let's review your support.

We can do that all remotely now with those students who elect to engage with us in online,

whether it's Zoom or teams telephone call, rather than actually having to come in to Kingsgate and meet with us in person.

So it's suiting more students to, you know, to be able to offer that kind of agile, a blended approach where it's needed.

So we'll definitely be you know, we've kept that as a business model for students.

Now they can choose how they'd like to engage with with well-being services, which is brilliant and really hope.

And I think it's given us more flexibility when we're talking to academic colleagues about adjustments or

support that's needed now that we've all experienced something very different and delivering remote learning.

We learnt the benefits as well as things that don't work so well.

But it does open up scope for conversation where we need to, to look at some of those flexibilities around access to pre-recorded material,

not potentially attending physically in person. If we got some students with fluctuating conditions,

unless there's a professional requirement or other requirement that states you have to attend something in person.

So it's opened up flexibility for the university to support a greater number of students with disabilities.

So engage with and succeed in learning. Yeah.

So I think I'll I'll definitely be keeping those tabs layout on my page and canvas.

I think they're really useful in sort of allowing students still to navigate through the topics that I'm teaching them.

And I think what actually has been very nice is going back to lecturing in person because I'm really scrutinize my lectures and I made them into digestible chunks.

I actually then when I gave that lecture in the hour slot, again, it was much more streamlined.

You know, it was it was far better actually in-person. So that was good.

That's been very helpful. And I think some of the students, particularly those with learning difficulties,

obviously anecdotally that they've told me that they did really benefit them from learning

online and being able to pause recorded content and they can work at their own pace.

So there still be things that I think we should try and keep for those students who did benefit from that.

But again, at the same time, we can't really group all those students with learning difficulties together,

because I do know that there were some students who really preferred being in person and struggled

that they couldn't just ask me a question at the end of the lecture and just pop and see me.

And and I think, you know, some of them definitely need that structure of coming into the lecture theatre on a daily basis.

And and actually, I did hear from students who were using online content that because they could pause it,

that they would end up taking hours on it on a certain lecture and actually taking notes,

which obviously wasn't very effective or efficient for them.

I think there'll be benefits for some students and keeping some of that online content going forward.

But I think also very much getting back in person as well.

I think one thing which has been very useful for me is, is actually being able to meet with students outside of the classroom on Zoom or Teams.

And I think that functionality now is brilliant because if they need some support with a particular topic,

it means they can meet with them and then I can share my screen and we can go through things.

And just that functionality is a lot better rather than having to try and pull up the slides on my computer in my office.

And, you know, actually, they can see it very well on Zoom or Teams.

And I think that's been useful. And that's obviously also very convenient for them because it means they don't have to come in to the dental school.

They can get in touch with me when they're studying at home as well. So that's quite good.

So, yes, I think there are some of the things which are going.

So, being back on campus has been positive for so many reasons. Thinking about well-being and support for our students.

What benefits do you see moving forward in the future of blended learning?

I think, you know, we've made huge strides as a as a university in embedding technologies to support access to digital materials.

You know, we're using technologies, all of us that were unfamiliar to a lot of people pre-pandemic.

And now we've been forced to actually use technologies in a very different way to support teaching and learning.

And all of it is positive. So we're using the skills learned. Everybody's use new skills to enhance provisions

going forward. Everything from not just delivery of teaching and learning,

obviously any appointments and engagement with students on a wellbeing level to how we might give feedback to students.

So I think there's an awful lot of positives that we can take from the skills that we've all

learned and the technologies that have improved or been made available. And for well-being,



we've really had a look at some of our supports and how we can enhance them or develop new supports in areas,

particularly reflecting on some of the findings from what students were telling us through that,

you know, the pandemic and what they struggled with and what's actually being reflected again by the Disabled Students Commission.

So look at the value of how we facilitate social groups,

this kind of intersectional spaces and opportunities to socialize and accessible ways where actually,

you know, we've already had a group for four students who with autism spectrum conditions for quite some time.

But we're now looking at how we can expand that provision to other other students with different conditions,

particularly thinking around mental health impacts. So we're exploring that at the moment.

And it's given wellbeing as a whole, an opportunity to really think about the pastoral support.

So, again, why has there's been recognition for wider well-being provision out in academic units and schools?

And that's just expanded recently, which is brilliant because it offers that local level of support as a starting point for students.

And that can offset so many different challenges, anxieties that can, you know,

can support that very early as well as signposting at the earliest opportunity to

the right supports that can help a student in finding the right just dismounts,

finding the right access to counselling, etc. and also a pastoral supports with chaplaincy.

They've been amazing. And you know,

they now have provisions such as walk and talk sessions and a listening ear and they're just those valuable additional supports

really that have come out of a recognition that we need to look at how we support our students and in different ways.

And it's not just sometimes those central core services, it's those softer earlier interventions that can be really, really valuable.

So I think that a kind of key positives,

some of the initiatives that have happened through the pandemic have been with some of our student wellbeing advisors,

and they'll be working with their academic colleagues to look at piloting, how to embed elements of well-being in the curriculum.

And that's been really successful. And I think that more people are looking at ways they can embed, for example,

of five ways to wellbeing and simple form of a even an early transitional lectures in academic units.

So, yeah, lots of positives. I think we've all we've all learned an awful lot and a lot we can we've recognized we can develop further.

There isn't directly related to teaching and learning and wellbeing can really support that.

I think very much this academic year coming, you know,

we really are hoping to be as much in person as possible now when it's a teacher really in favour of that.

You know, I love that in person teaching because I get that instant feedback from students.

And that's really important because it allows me to adapt or in real time.

So if I need to, I can tell if I need to slow down a bit.

Pretty quickly, just from the faces of these students, looking at me, watching me speak, I know what probably what they're thinking.

And if I need to go over things again, you know, if there's some puzzled looks, then I'd get that.

And then I suppose that was very difficult to gauge online. I couldn't.

You know, I had to just wait for students to come to me and sort of ask me to explain things there that wants that watched the online content.

And so being in person is, you know, really looking forward to getting that instant feedback again, you know,

and obviously not just the puzzled looks, but the smiles and, you know, that sort of enjoyment as well.

And I do really miss that. So that'll be great going forward. And as you say, you know, talking about well-being as well.

It's such an important aspect to be in person. And there's lots of things that as a teacher, you know, you can pick up on and, you know,

you can tell if a students perhaps imbalanced in the social or academic activity and, you know, they look well and or even just the attending.

And again, you know, that's something that's difficult to monitor when when they're learning at a distance and online,

it's much easier to keep track of that in person. And I'm for it to get back to that.

And yeah, it just really helps to get to know the students a lot. A lot more.

Definitely do see the benefits of some of the material that we've generated online.

And I hate to get rid of that. I think what was what was really useful actually this year. -

So I had a workshop planned in December in person and know printed off everything and all ready to go.

And then there was Covid in my house so I couldn't come. But actually, because I delivered that all online the previous year, I was set up.

Essentially, I could just flip to that version and that was fantastic.

And it wasn't entirely what I wanted because I wanted to be in person with the students.

But from a from a learning exercise, actually, it worked just as well and got great feedback on that.

And it meant I could just I could keep it in the program.

It was in the order in which we designed it to be in that course and meant I didn't have to reschedule it.

So that functionality going forward is obviously good to have as a bit of a backer.

I think one thing which I'll always stick with me, that Sandy Alden and her team came to speak to the faculty for us.

And one thing that will stick with me from that is, is actually really supporting the students who do have learning difficulties in

being able to to now have to make that transition perhaps from in-person to online, back to in-person and really understanding that blended approach and what that means

for them and their learning and and then having to change their approach throughout.

And I think we just need to really consider this and then share that the sports there going forward.

So that's it for this episode. Thanks to Sandy and the Louisa for their input.

If you would like further information, you can go to the show notes on the Web page. And please remember to like and subscribe. See you next time.