

Episode 029: In conversation with our new Dean of Digital Education

Hello and welcome to the first episode in season two of the learning and teaching at Newcastle University podcast.

My name is Ben Steel and I'll be doing a quick introduction to this season on this episode.

You may have heard from the trailer last week that we are moving from a fortnightly to monthly schedule for our podcast.

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In this episode, we hear a longform conversation between our dean of education for HaSS,

Sarah Graham, who's talking to our new dean of digital education, Dr. David Kennedy.

Their conversation goes through David's new role as dean of digital education, his strategy for the next year or so,

the challenges that we as a university face on how he plans to move digital education forward.

So over to Sarah and David. This is a rare opportunity to sit down and talk together, isn't it?

Yeah, absolutely. I wonder if it would just be worthwhile. It's not about me.

It's about the digital strategy and you leading that.

So do you want to share with us and our listeners a little bit about you and your background first David.

Yes, sure, Sarah. So interestingly, just last week or the week before, I got an email from the university saying, I've been here 20 years,

which was a bit of a landmark, and it gave it an opportunity just to reflect on where I've come from.

So my first employment in Newcastle was as a research associate in FMS, so I was looking at peptide and drug movement in the gut.

So quite quite a change to research associate.

I've always had a keen interest in education and the opportunity arose kind of in 2006 for a temporary post,

an education post as a medical education advisor, a kind of teaching fellow post for a graduate entry medical programme, mainly teaching physiology.

So I kind of jumped at that. really loved it.

A year later, secured an open ended lecturer contract and then really kind of just got stuck in to everything education.

So I've kind of had probably had most roles in education in school from, you know,

a year lead to the kind of pastoral leads many students hadn't done well in exams

through to a board of Studies chairing board of studies degree programme director,

which was a big role in medicine to help us for a number of years. Deputy head of school DELT or DOE,

as they are now. So several educational roles and really loved the impact that you could make positive impact and while doing that,

particularly with the director of a degree programme director role.

I got more more interested in how technology can support learning, so again I have always had that technology to drive learning.

But it should enable so can enable us to do things we want to do.

So I have implemented many technological solutions, I'll say, to enhance all students experience and to help our education provision in medicine.

And then that kind of slotted nicely when this role came up.

Before that, actually, I was actually deputy dean for education in the faculty for for three years from 2019.

And then this role came up and it kind of just seemed like a natural fit for me and my interest.

So that's where I've got to in 20 years, which is quite a remarkable journey, 20 years and just a couple of minutes.

You've really got a holistic kind of academic profile and that real inspiration from transformative learning,

but really keenly that introduction of technology to really enhance the student learning journey and to enhance our teaching.

So I guess when you applied for the dean role that was at the forefront of it, you want to talk a little bit about digital education,

some of the things that you have done and some of the things that you think challenge and are a real opportunity for us in the short term.

Sure. Okay. So so what have I done?

So one of the things that I think frustrates many people is, you know, a lack of a holistic approach and we tend to silo things off.

And one of the things that I had the opportunity to do and it was when I programmes director again.

We have a complete curriculum review in medicine, so give us a great opportunity to look at things in a whole.

We also had a significant increase in student numbers our campus partnership with Durham, ended the same year as the roll out of a new curriculum.

So we had a large increase in cohort, which we're now setting up 367 a year.

So that's quite a big cohort every year for five years.

And even prior to that, that kind of intake increased intake our students were feeding back that

Often they felt like a number or personal tutoring scheme wasn't working.

And so we had some some kind of fundamental issues that I wanted to address that.

And I devised a scheme of academic mentorship. So again, that was really about supporting our students through the programme,

enhancing their academic and personal development as well as, you know, that kind of first port of call for support guidance and so on.

And kind of key to that to make that work was there are mentors needed to know a bit about the students they were mentoring.

If you go and see a doctor, they have your records, they can see what you've done.

And it was the same sort of idea and that kind of shared information data on student

progress and assessments was built in to that kind of mentorship role.

And you know, the students we consulted were consulted at the time of developing.

It kind of said, Well, you know, mentors need to know that if they're going to support me, they need to know a bit about how they get on.

So therefore,

then came the technological solution to support that mentorship scheme developed an e-portfolio with draws to lots of sources of information,

not just Newcastle's E portfolio but assessment and feedback data attendance data,

all sorts of things were presented that in a really friendly way for students

and staff to to use and have conversations about identify areas of strength,

weakness, develop learning plans. We also had our electronic sign up skills issues that are placement again they were all cordoned off for.

And you have this kind of holistic approach to the student's journey and you have meaningful

conversations with medicine and that that scheme really had a massive impact student satisfaction,

personal tutoring rocketed. And so and so that was a great, great success, I think.

And I also kind of designed, I'll say, designed.

I was an architect, if you like, for bespoke medical environment to fit our programme, which is slightly different, you know, modular and so on.

And the I.T. team and FMS did a fantastic job building that and and again, that's rated as being really successful in the student body.

So that's very much kind of looking at the curriculum,

but also looking at the the extra curricular activity and support for our students as well in their programmes and how we make the most of that.

So what is the what's the digital agenda in higher education and and generally and how?

How do we then think about that or work towards that, which I know you're working toward the digital strategy?

How do you how do you even conceive of something like a digital strategy for a place like Newcastle?

Yeah. Well, that's that's a really big question. So thank you.

I think there's a lot of opinions out there.

So there are some that would suggest that a radical transformation of education requires

that we're going to do things markedly of education institutions to survive at best,

let alone do things that are, you know, the best education for learners of the future.

There are also a lot of challenges, you know, they're external drivers.

Government change, you know, changes all the time.

But but but you know, there's not no target at a 50 percent into higher education.

So what does that mean?

There's more of a push for lifelong learning for apprenticeships and vocational training, rather than, maybe, you know, push for certain degrees.

And some voices are saying are certain degree is worth it.

And there's been a lot of surveys and so on around that will include things like trust and education is much lower than it ever has been.

There's a lack of feeling of value for money through education,

and some graduates and quite a high proportion probably be better off financially if they'd never gone to university and did something else.

So, you know, there's a lot out there. I think we probably have to do things differently.

At the same time, there's a lot of big edtech companies that come in and say, you know,

we will take these were promised as glitzy things, and you just have to look at things like the Meta advert now

that, you know, the lecture theatre would just be code. Now that might be farfetched.

That might be sci fi. There might be some elements of truth in there.

But I think what I would like to do and what I see for Newcastle is that we do things that are educationally sound.

So whatever we do, we want to be pedagogically driven.

We want to do things that are the best for our learners and have our eyes open to where technology can support that or enable that to happen,

whether that's, you know, short courses, doing online programmes with touchpoints on campus,

whether it's being more blended in the way that we deliver our education on campus to make sure that we do things that are effective.

And, you know, as I said, best for our learners.

That's really interesting, particularly the landscape in higher education and doing things differently.

And you know, I think there's generally a support for looking again at our practise

and particularly where the role of digital education can support that pedagogy.

As you've described really well, where will we find the right places to to enhance our programmes digitally?

What's your plan for for finding and doing the right things as opposed to?

Yeah, sure.

So, so one of the first things that you know I'm going to do is develop a strategy and that's going to heavily lean on our education strategy,

but really focussed on how technology can enhance that and take advantage of some of the opportunities that are out there,

particularly around online courses, online learning.

It is a growing market.

So I think, you know, if we want to to think about the future, we've got to think about where the markets are and where our strengths.

So within that hopefully will give us some structure to guide our future with some kind of milestones in there, maybe looking at.

This is this is an idea at the moment, but maybe looking something like 2030, you know,

where do we want to be in 2030 and then developing that framework for how we might kind of get more towards that kind of direction,

recognising things change, you know, particularly technology, it changes all the time.

So I am just going to be conscious of that. And part of the other challenge, we've got everything that we have, all the technologies we use,

all have really evolved from a very traditional campus based education.

They've evolved over time if we think about the systems that our students and our colleagues have to engage with.

Just add ons and bolt ons and capital work together very well.

And if we throw into the mix, you know, much more flexible learning idea, with multiple starts in the year,

you know, people engaging dip in and out of education in the lifelong learning agenda our systems just can't cope.

Or at least it's not very efficient to do as a lot of manual work arounds.

So we've got to think about that as well. Where how does our digital infrastructure really, how's that going to to shape up to?

Some, to some extent, an unknown future, but one that's likely to be much more flexible than the needs of learners.

And we've got to be efficient at doing it we can't we can't continue with what we're doing everything. And our digital infrastructure sounds very costly.

But some think that that needs to be taken into consideration. So what do you see as the big challenges or the big obstacles barriers may be in the

next 12 months or beyond that idea of a strategy for the next what eight years?

That's that's a that's a really good question. And I think, you know, being in role now for just over a month, I'm starting to identify even,

you know, some some things I wasn't necessarily aware of beforehand. But there are there are challenges.

So, you know, there is enthusiasm there are individuals that have got great ideas.

So one of the challenges is enhancing that sort of or harnessing that and progressing it.

So I think there's nothing like an enthusiasm killer than lots of barriers. Particular for our colleagues that have an interest in developing online programmes.

We've got to be conscious about not being to top down and telling, but much more letting things grow and enthusing people.

We've got to get a bit of more of a culture of think of accepting when things don't go well.

So enabling failure or allowing failure and then parking it and letting go, I think we've got a tendency sometimes to do things and want it to work.

So we just keep doing it. Rather than park it saying, right?

We're going to move onto to something that doesn't work.

There are some big challenges that culturally for us to think about where we want to go to in terms of education, medium, longer term.

I think that's really important and thinking about that, not being risk averse and failing fast,

but learning from how we move forward and with an agenda.

Actually, that's quite moveable, but also very viscerally felt for many people, for our colleagues and students.

And I guess that leads me to my final question, which is about students and they're going to be having, you know,

coming out the other end of a COVID pandemic and having to be in a virtual environment

and learning that's been a very clear signalling that there are preferences.

It worked for some, not for others, it was. And you know that that optionality is the key.

What can our students at Newcastle Uni expect or perhaps feel in the next five to 10 years in terms of our digital environment?

Yeah, that's again, it really good and live question.

And there's no doubt, you know, the pandemic accelerated thinking around digital education that there's no denying that.

And there's some things that we did. We did very well and we should we should continue with those things.

And there's some things that, you know, maybe weren't done well or could have been better if we had more time to plan.

So when we talk about, you know, true blended learning, we're not just talking about getting up last year's recap,

we're talking about building a better quality resource. So I think we've got to be conscious of it.

You know where the student comes over and the quality of what happened because we

were in a rush and how we could do things better if we weren't in that position.

We've got to bear in mind that the students that we have here,

particularly during the pandemic and will be all our mainstays student core for a long time are wanting a campus based education.

So absolutely that personal interaction that teaching on campus, that discussion support, we need to make sure that that happens.

That doesn't mean we can't have the digital on the site to support it.

And, you know, our learners now centres everything we do and they are living in a digital world as much as we are.

And there may be some expectation that, you know, it isn't necessarily just the paper handouts that we get,

but they have much more accessible, flexible ways of engagement per education.

And our challenge really is to make sure that we.

We understand what it is that they would benefit from what will help their education and to listen so again,

when things don't work, understand why stop doing it,

If that's what's merited, if not changes.

But also harnessed the things that put you to work, some of that kind of comments I've heard from all comments from our students is that,

you know, they really enjoy the flexibility, that having resource online can offer.

But it sometimes has to be very good quality and there has to be, you know, it's not replacing the teaching on campus.

Just what we teach, how we teach might be different on campus. If that can make sense. That really does make sense.

It's about, as you said, getting behind the learning and supporting it rather than it being the learning itself in and of itself.

Any key take home and for us to watch out for digital education in the in the coming months.

And I guess my my key take home would be, you know, get involved.

So, you know, we will be developing a strategy. There will be consultation.

Our students are key to that, get involved. Say what you think.

Tell us what we should be doing. And same with all our colleagues who tell us

What is it working for you? What the challenges are. What might be difficult if we think about a much more flexible learning package in the future?

What do we need to do to enable that? And it may be a technological solution.

It may not be. But once we know that we can start to work out what it is, we need to do to fix it, so, so get involved is my take-home message.

Thank you. That's been a really lovely conversation about how digital education and I look forward to engaging further.

And thank you very much. Thank you, Sarah. Thank you for your time. Thank you very much.

Firstly for listening and welcome back to the podcast for a new season.

Thank you to Sarah and David for the great conversation. I hope you enjoyed it and you got a lot from it.

We will see you in a month's time for episode two, where we will look at authentic assessment.

Thank you very much. And remember to like subscribe and tell your friends about this podcast.

Bye bye.