

Episode 015: New Terms, New Semesters, New Horizons

Hello. Happy New Year. And welcome to Episode 15 of the Learning and Teaching Podcast.

I'm Kieran from the Learning and Teaching Development Service and I'll be your host this week.

The episode today is in two halves with a couple of interviews, one from a student perspective and one staff.

So in the second half we're going to hear from Jack Chamberlin and Sam Mead, who tell us about the PARTNERS program at the university.

It's an initiative that aims to widen student participation and entry into higher education, and it's proved very successful.

So stay tuned. But first, we caught up with SAgE postgrad Josh..

You might remember from an earlier episode and as we're approaching the new term at Newcastle,

we wanted to get his take on returning to uni after the Christmas break.

We started by asking him how it feels to get back into the rhythm of uni after a hiatus of the holidays.

Oh, first of all, when you come back in your first job, you've not done it before.

So it's a bit of an odd experience because you've not had an Easter yet.

You've not had a summer yet. You're bring in all of your stuff back from your house and you turn up in your rooms, you know, is almost empty again.

So you've got all this stuff and you are like "oh, god, I've got to revise my exams."

But you also want to unpack it all. It's. And then you also want to see all your friends arrive at the same time.

And you've got various different things to do. And you kind of just have to sort out your priorities and just get through it all.

So I tend to say is just smash through all of the unpacking, get everything in your room straight away,

don't leave it for one week- two week in suitcases, spend an evening with all your friends in your flat.

And then just get straight on to the work that you need to do for your exams, because you have one week buffer between getting back where a little bit.

Teaching occurs and it's is a really weird time that week after Christmas. And that's the same for second year and

third year and. It's just because teaching is occurring

but you've almost already finished your modules. So they also put on extra sessions, fill out revision and stuff like that.

And to an extent you almost feel like slightly out of your depth because you come to these revision sessions and they expect you to

know, stuff and you don't because you've not got to that stage in your revision yet.

And you've not got to the cramming bit you feel kind of like drowning in the workload.

But you need to just break it up into sections and think, what exams do I have in what order, how much space do I have in between each exam?

And think if I've got four days between one exam and another, the one afterwards

you might not need to do as much off in the first week, but if you've got two back to back, you might want to start a lot of revision

on the one the day after. So you have to allocate your time quite wisely.

Okay. So does that mean that you and your friends that you're making a plan before you go away for the break?

It depends on your attitude because some people I've got friends that will have been revising before they even went home for Christmas.

They like really on top of that. And they would have - say, you're away for 21 days of Christmas.

They might have worked 14 of them,

whereas you've got all the people that actively know they're probably not going to do a lot of work because they might have paid work at home.

Seen friends and family Christmas festive festivities. You might be travelling if you're at your grandma's house and the other side

of the country to your actual home and you're sharing a bedroom with someone.

There's no chance you can get some revision done if you are, someone is on top of it.

You can plan it well in advance. Whereas anyone else I'd just say try and do as much as possible.

Probably when you're home for Christmas, start on reading.

Going through your previous lectures, going through your notes, maybe exams and past papers aren't quite what you up to yet.

But just try and do as much as possible. You can do it on your phone. You can pull it up on Canvas.

Or you get a ReCap recording and you could put it on in a car travelling somewhere,

or if you're on a train on the way home, you can pull it up and you can revise that way and every little bit helps.

What about downtime? How much of that do you give yourself and what do you see as the value of it?

So, yeah, the work life balance is very important in every job, I think it's- to an extent harder for

University students in work because you don't have 9 to 5.

You might have lecture that you have turn up to seminars, lab sessions, but a really good chunk of your work is all self-motivation.

So if you have a job, you know, it's probably going to be a seven, eight,

nine hour shift that you sign up to four or five days a week and you can turn up to your job and then go home and forget about it.

Whereas university is very different because if you wake up late, that's like you're eating into your hours in the afternoon or if you decide

to watch a little bit of Netflix at home rather than revising or if you spend your two hour free between lectures just

having to catch up with your mates.

It's very easy to burn time, especially when you're going in between lectures when you meant to be doing assignments or revision or tutorial sheets.

And it is a lot of self-motivation which is very different from the workplace environment.

And you just have to acknowledge that there is time which you will have to spend just relaxing and taking a bit of downtime.

And there is time that you will have to potentially use some of your afternoons or a day on your weekends to get through some of the work that you might have missed out on.

It is a requirement for you to have a good chunk of time off just to reset because burnout does occur, but it doesn't occur quickly.

People can work twelve hour shifts, seven days a week or 16 hours, five days a week.

And they get through it because that's what they're doing, but they can't do it forever.

So you might feel all right at the time, but you need to think about your long term goals.

So you need to make sure that at least over Christmas, say you've got 21 days, you dedicate at least seven of them.

So you've got Boxing Day for Christmas Day, Christmas Eve, New Year's Day, New Year's Eve,

and then maybe one or two, three, four days where you catch up with you may see some family.

You need to remember that you want spend probably half to two thirds of the time, actually, just take a bit of a reset.

And I know the exams are over the corner, but if you then return to university, you've got three weeks.

And when you turn up to an exam it's how you perform on the day,

and if you've had a bit of relaxation for a couple of weeks before, it means your performance is a lot better people.

It's like with sports people, if they train and train and train and train and train and overexert themselves,

you don't have the optimum performance on the final day, even if you've done seven days training every single day.

They need to take a rest day in between and then they then get like a fast running time after the same thing with your brain. You just need to treat yourself sometimes time off.

Finally, we asked Josh about the transition from semester one to semester two just more of the same.

Are there potential surprises along the way? Do you have to consider?

So it's different for a lot of courses. But the two ways that going back in to lectures tend to occur is some modules are split across

the whole year and you do first semester and then you still do them in second semester.

And the other way is to finish some modules in first semester and then whatever credits

that they were will then be replaced by all the modules in the second semester.

And sometimes it feels a bit more odd to have ones that continue through the year

because you've even either not done a test on them or you've done like a smaller value one.

And depending on your performance in the first test or whether your assignment was sometimes to an extent,

you kind of feel either overconfident or overconfident with one of the -

With that module.

And I experience this in first year I had engineering maths module that I did an exam with was probably 20 percent or something like that.

And I did really, really well at it.

So I then kind of went in semi cruise control for second semester because I thought that I was really good at engineer maths.

I didn't have to put as much time into it so focussed on the other modules and I kind of let myself slip to an extent and then I did quite poorly at

the end of the year. And that's when I learned the just because you've achieved one thing doesn't mean you'll necessarily do it the next time around.

Because whether it's an assignment or a test, that they examine different areas.

So you just have to take a bit of a reset and think I'm back to basics here.

I don't actually know what this module is.

I might have done six months of uni and done really well at it. But this is something slightly different.

It might be a complete experience. Some people have labs in the second semester and didn't have them in first.

They might be working on computing modules they didn't have.

So you might even be in a different environment or using completely different skills.

And you have to adapt to that quickly.

A ton of thoughtful and useful advice there from Josh about the post-holiday return, and we're grateful to Josh for taking the time to contribute.

Next up. And as promised, I went over to Kingsgate to meet Jack and Sam from the PARTNERS program.

It's a really valuable and important offer to school leavers who can get a taste of university before they start their degrees proper.

I started by asking Jack for an introduction to the project as a whole.

Yeah sure. So the Partners program is Newcastle University's supported entry route.

It's designed to aid the transition between school, college and university life.

So it's all about introducing various aspects of university level study to students earlier than they would normally get.

So it means that once they start at Newcastle University in September, October,

they are kind of one step ahead of the game that they've already learned certain things that they haven't encountered at school,

in college, particularly thinking about different learning styles and different learning environments.

So they do the program before starting at university in July.

And over a thousand students for you take part in it.

So last year we had 1150 students on the program and over 900 of those students actually registered with us at the university.

It's been going quite a long time to be gone since 1999. It's one of the longest running programs of its kind in the country.

So it's kind of thought of as a best practice kind of guide nationwide.

So it's quite, quite nice to be involved in. I think in total we've had over 7000 students get involved, loads and loads.

Students take part in it every year. And it's subject specific.

So students who are on the program, we'll do a timetable of activities that are relevant to the subject that they've applied to.

So if a student applies to history, they'll do a history summer school.

If they apply in medicine, they'll do a medicine, some school, et cetera, et cetera.

And there's actually over 30 different subject strands that students can get involved in.

So whatever they do is going to be relevant to them and their studying styles at university because there's so many subjects rounds involved.

It means there's loads of staff involvement as well. So there's about six members, members of the partners team.

So the central part of the team that we coordinate about 150 ish staff like across the university.

So each subtext round has its own academic lead.

And then within that lead is usually a team of academics who helped deliver academic content on the program.

So it means that when students are attending on the medicine program, they're going to be sitting in labs a lot,

learning from their academics that they will have at undergraduate level.

If it's history that might be out and about on field trips or whatever it may be,

it's all relevant to the subject that they have applied to it. As part of the program.

They get a lower offer of study. So, for example, in medicine, if a student applies to medicine, the offer of entry is three 'A's at A level.

And if they do partners, it's three 'B's. So it's a massive reduction in terms of their entry to to the university.

That's one of the big, big benefits to the student.

But when they come onto the program, they realise all the additional benefits that are involved as well.

It's completely free as well. So students don't pay anything if they're travelling to attend the event.

We put them up in accommodation at Castle Leazes. So they got the experience of that as well, which is great.

My next question was for Sam, who attended the summer school himself several years ago now.

I asked him what are some of the distinctions around university learning

That students might find challenging in comparison to their school or college experience?

I think a lot of students, when they're applying to university, don't realize sometimes how different it can be from like studying at

Year twelve - year thirteen is quite a big leap.

And I think a lot of students that we've spoken to who have come in through the program, maybe weren't expecting certain styles of teaching.

They expect it to be very teacher driven and very sort of led by the academics or the lecturers.

But that just isn't the case at all. So I think one of the really good benefits of the PARTNERS program is to bridge that gap between sixth

form and university study because there is sort of a massive leap that students have to take,

I think, a lot of academic skills that are required at university level.

They're obviously brand new to a lot of students when they come in to study at uni and things like referencing meeting the different library systems,

all those sorts of things can be quite daunting to new students.

Ms. The PARTNERS program gives them sort of a taste in to those kinds of systems and practices as well as the sort of academic content.

So it's important to sort of cover all aspects.

Next, I ask Jack and Sam if they could tell us about the range of student backgrounds of those who attend summer school.

The big, big aims of the program is to widen participation in in higher education.

And obviously Newcastle University in particular by helping students from underrepresented groups get into university.

It's massively rewarding.

You know, I think there's about seven members of the student recruitment team who actually did partners themselves.

It's quite nice to see these students come into the program, graduate and sometimes get jobs within the team.

And it's just nice to be part of that journey.

Widening access and participation is at the forefront of a lot of the work the student recruitment team does.

And so basically to encourage and progression to higher education and university from less represented backgrounds, whatever background that is for different reasons.

People don't have the same opportunities to study at university or to get into higher education.

So it's it's quite rewarding, I think, to be able to work on that side of things, the social mobility, equality side of things, at least for me personally.

Students take part in the program from any educational background.

So students who are applying to any Newcastle University undergraduate degree can take

part and partners it nationwide so students can apply from all over the country as well.

So in terms of the schools and colleges that they might have gone to prior partners, that is there's a massive range there as well.

The idea is to support students who have faced difficulties in applying in HE for one reason or another.

There's fifteen different criteria for the program.

So students need to meet any one of these criteria to take part in and take advantage of all the different benefits we've gone through.

It's in line with the university's access and participation plan.

And so it's all about addressing underrepresented groups at the university. So it would be things like your home postcode is probably our most common one.

So about 70 percent of the students who come on the program meet the home postcode criteria.

And that would be relating to the number of residents within a postcode that are attending HE.

We use three different datasets. So every postcode in the country is categorized by these datasets according to their participation in HE.

So like literally how many people on that postcode traditionally go to university or there's another

one which is about their associate socio economic background of the residents within that postcode.

And they've all been categorized according to the residential makeup.

It's all about raising access from underrepresented groups.

So if you attend a low performing school, that would probably be our second most common one.

Things like financial difficulties that students might be facing if they are care experience

students or the experienced care all their life or if they are a young carer themselves.

So they're all different barriers to HE in one way or another.

But that does mean that we need to have a massive range of support available to them both in the build up to the summer schools,

we know that the right support is there for them,

whether it be the right pastoral support or the right support, while they are physically at the summer school and but also when they here as well.

In terms of the delivery styles that lecturers are using things like that.

So presumably it's good to have the involvement of students who are currently studying for their degrees.

So the partners program hires a bunch of current students every year for the summer school

and to support both us as staff and the students who are attending and the summer school.

And it's always got really, really good feedback and the engagement that the prospective students have with the current students is

clearly really, really valuable.

And so it's something that we try really hard to sort of get right and to get sort of current students involved with. A lot of the time the reps,

and stuff that we hire will be ex students that have been through the program,

they've been through the summer school, then registered at the university.

So they're well aware of exactly everything that the prospective students are going through.

And I just think it's good to have that sort of role model within sort of the partners team to be able to talk to you about any personal experiences at uni.

And it just get really sort of good feedback when the students engage.

The students go through a very rigorous training program in terms of like prepping them for the summer school and I think that

peer to peer support is like it's key to the success of the program.

I think last year we had about 80 student reps last year. So there's quite a lot students that get involved.

And like some say, as we look to get our students back involved in the program, kind of giving back and developing the program on an ongoing basis.

It's really nice to see what we love actually, what does happen quite a lot is particular partners getting,

a part of students being really enthusiastic about getting back involved, having done the program and seeing the benefits of it.

And we also hire a team of student ambassadors as well.

So these guys sometimes work on the summer school, but work on a lot of our other activities as well.

But we host a year 12 summer school as well, which kind of feeds into partners.

We also do do lots of like outreach events on campus events and lots different activities that students can get involved with.

OK, so that's the picture of engagement from students. How can Newcastle staff, get involved with the summer school?

I guess there's a few different ways that colleagues would be able to get involved.

If they're an academic within their school, it might be the case that they can help teach on summer school.

Obviously, we have lead contacts within each academic school delivering content.

It might be the case that they need support in delivering if that is the case.

You could just get in touch with the policy team, I guess,

and we could put you in touch with the relevant colleague from that department and see what support they need.

Aside from the academic side of things, though, there's there's always other opportunities.

So like during the careers sessions that we do and we're always looking for either colleagues or graduates or

industry professionals to help out whether it's on a careers fair or a graduate industry webinar style event.

So we hosted last year. So we had like a series of 30 or 40 industry webinars and we had a massive range of people

helping out on them and not just people from the university like industry professionals.

So we had solicitors and doctors and all kinds of different people and helping out in support and students in that journey to HE but

beyond that as well, some subjects are obviously a very clear cut on what they going to be doing.

So, you know, if you if you study in medicine, it's probably quite clear cut in the student's mind what their career is going to be.

But that's obviously not always the case of these sorts of sessions are designed

to give students a bit of a taste of what they could do with their degree.

And obviously, we would love to have staff involved in that where possible.

So the next one we wanted to know was what kind of feedback do you get from the students themselves about the program,

whether it's during the summer school or later on in their university career?

Obviously, during the event, we have evaluation processes in terms of getting the qualitative and quantitative feedback during the event.

And then we follow up with them in December of first year.

So we're about to do it now for current first year, ask a lot the same sorts of questions that they had during the summer school.

So we can get that comparison between like what they thought then and what what they think now will interest us.

Interesting aspects that often comes out of that is during the summer school, like when they're doing things like referencing sessions at

academic level, when they're doing things like note taking or independent study when they're on the summer school.

And in July, having just finished school and college, that the feedback at that time is usually a bit like.

"Not really sure what the point of this is like. Why are we doing this?"

But the feedback we get, having started the university, it becomes quite apparent to them why they did it and how much of a benefit it was.

I had quite a nice conversation with a student last year who said that they became a bit of a guru within their class in terms of reference,

and because they were quite happy to tell people that it did partners and they've already done referenceing.

And so in September, all of their friends were asking them how a reference at university level,

which is quite nice because students do get concerned about being highlighted

as a PARTNER student once they are here as if it's a negative thing. But the student actually embraced it as it was positive that they've been through the

process and they know how to reference and they were just sharing their knowledge, which was quite nice. So it's nice when you see those success stories come through.

The last question was for Sam. As someone who's attended the school himself, what is the abiding memory that you take away from it?

I guess for me, one of the best parts was the social element of it.

The fact that you're going to make people you are going to be on your course when you start in September

and you're going to meet like minded people that are going to be your peers when you start university.

And I'm actually still really good friends with someone who I met at the Partner Summer School.

I guess it just sort of solidified that I wanted to come to the university that I'd sort of enjoy -

I guess I just enjoyed my time sort of studying for the week and getting to grips with everything.

And if anything, it just made me like more excited to start in September. I guess it was just more like familiarity,

like I felt a bit more comfortable and I knew some of the lecturers already and the people in my lectures and seminars.

So it didn't feel completely alien, I guess,

which I think a lot of students do feel when they come to university that like it's a completely whole new world and they don't know where to start. So it's definitely positive for that.

So that's it for this episode.

Thank you to Josh, Jack and Sam for all their insights. If you want further info, you can go to the show notes on the Web page.

And please remember to like, subscribe and tell your friends, goodbye.