

Student Success: Flexible learning part two

Podcast transcript

—

Stuart Norton, Senior Advisor, Advance HE

Kim Ansell, Senior Advisor, Advance HE

Professor Lisa Hannah, Dean of Students, Deakin University

Key

- + **Stuart:** Stuart Norton (introduction)
- + **Kim:** Kim Ansell (host)
- + **Lisa:** Professor Lisa Hannah

Transcript

Stuart: Flexible learning is about empowering students by offering them choices in how, what, when and where they learn: the pace, place and mode of delivery. Flexible learning requires a balance of power between institutions and students, and seeks to find ways in which choice can be provided that is economically viable and appropriately manageable for institutions and students alike.

My name is Stuart Norton, senior Adviser in Learning and Teaching at Advance HE and I'm leading the update to the Advance HE Student Success Framework Series. I'm delighted to introduce these podcasts that are part of a range of activity linked to the forthcoming Advance HE literature Review, authored by Professor Mark Loon of Northumbria University.

The flexible learning literature review project looked in-depth into 105 research articles published between 2016 and 2021, including Advance HE's report on the topic. The papers reviewed detailed research undertaken across the world, using quantitative, qualitative and mixed methods.

These podcasts complement this review, looking at different, yet equally important aspects of flexible learning. The whole series of podcasts are available on the Advance HE website alongside all the member benefit work that's been undertaken so far and will continue to do so in the Student Success framework series.

Kim: Hello and welcome to this podcast. I'm Kim Ansell from Advance HE exploring how institutions create an inclusive culture which enables innovative and flexible teaching and learning. The culture of the institution is a key factor in enabling the innovation and flexibility required by those responsible for creating and delivering students' success. In the last two years, institutional cultures have pivoted - typically emergent rather than planned - and higher education colleagues have been juxtaposed between operating in an inflexible and unpredictable climate often in either crisis or survival mode, when at the same time transforming online student learning and assessment faster than ever before. It is well reported that the pandemic has exposed disparities among staff and students who faced

particular barriers to teaching and learning. These ranged from mental health and or disability issues to highlighting accessibility, digital poverty and bringing inclusive practices to the fore. So how can institutions enable a direction of travel which unites everyone and which creates the right environment for staff and students to thrive? Furthermore, what can we learn from the pandemic in order to keep the best and ditch the rest? A previous higher education academy flexible pedagogies report sought to uncover why institutions need to consider this and concluded that the extent of change remains dependent on the use of strategic approaches that are context-sensitive and take account of the complexities of teaching and learning within institutions. That statement is even more relevant today going beyond pedagogies and encompass flexible assessment and student outcomes, but also to encompass a more nuanced and sophisticated inclusive and collaborative environment where everyone has a voice and a role to play. I am delighted to welcome Professor Lisa Hannah, the Dean of Students and leads the Office of the Dean of Students at Deakin University Australia to share her insights and expertise on this theme. Welcome Lisa, what a great job title. I'm very envious.

Lisa: Thanks for having me Kim.

Kim: Lisa, the implications for those involved in transforming HE whether working at a strategic level to deliver vision and mission or directly involved in developing and delivering teaching and learning to improve student outcomes are broad, deep and may offer exciting challenge as we emerge from the pandemic. To realize its full potential, what are the Deakin institutional priorities for empowering the learning and teaching process?

Lisa: Well Kim I might start by framing how our student success is integral to our mission and strategy at Deakin. So our strategic plan is called 'Deakin 2030 ideas to impact' and it really focuses on on the transformative power of ideas and innovation to deliver lasting value to communities globally and locally. And that strategic plan states very clearly that students will always be the heart of our university, they're our true north. And it emphasizes our commitment to student success and that focus ties back to our ambition and our values and its emphasis on our investment in our people and culture. And I think that really empowers staff and students to value teaching and learning - and I'll speak a little bit more later about our values and the ways in which we're moving ahead with that. But my own office, the Office for the Dean of Students, takes a holistic approach to supporting student success. My teams bring together our programme of students as partners work across the institution, our academic and peer support services for students, our promotion and management of academic progress and student academic integrity, and our student complaints, student conduct and student appeals processes. So collectively what we're aiming to do is to optimize student success by promoting a culture of respect and integrity and ensuring procedural and substantive fairness for students. And what's really important for us in doing that is to make sure that we're bringing together all the stakeholders within our university community to address the issues around creating the best environment for staff and student agency and wellbeing. So I'd like to give you an example if I may. We have what we call an I

Belong suite of work at Deakin which is coordinated by our Diversity, Equity and Inclusion team and it's a formalising of our commitment to belonging at the institution. It's a set of principles which are in inclusion, belonging, safety and respect which really sets a standard for students and staff across our university. And that suite of work takes a whole of institution approach to capacity building, to training and it includes offering training and immersive learning experiences for staff and students on things like respectful behaviour, on how to be an active bystander, on unconscious bias. We've got a immersive learning experience called a day in the life which aims to put people in the shoes of their fellow students and staff and really give visibility and understanding to the varied varied experiences of people in the Deakin community and how they experience things like discrimination, harassment, barriers to inclusion and victimisation. So in answer to your question, I think we have a very high level strategic commitment to really empowering our students and our staff to prioritise collaboration belonging and inclusion, and in turn that creates a teaching and learning environment that enables student success.

Kim: Thank you Lisa, that's a really helpful reflection on the foundations needed to create an inclusive culture for all stakeholders. So what are the most challenging aspects of creating the right environment to enable innovation and flexible learning and ultimately student success at Deakin? And more widely what do you think are the biggest challenges colleagues from across the sector face when trying to embed and create the right culture at the same time as keeping on top of the day job?

Lisa: That's a great question. There's a lot to do. I think institutionally empowering our our peers and our colleagues, empowering staff requires us often to challenge our organisational mindset, move away from siloed and micro decisions and and create a joined up and and flexible design capability. So here at Deakin we always aim to be Australia's most progressive and responsive university and we've recently undergone a process that we've called 'Deakin Reimagined'. Where we realize that our best future requires us to reimagine a sustainable Deakin that responds effectively to current challenges such as - as you've mentioned - the unprecedented shifts in international higher education which have been precipitated by the pandemic. So we've restructured our operations across the university to really embed those design principles around joined up thinking and collective decision making and collaboration. So my office is part of a new much broader deputy vice chancellor academic portfolio which really encompasses all aspects of the student life cycle. And we work with faculty staff with frontline academics and teaching and learning to foster that agency, that staff need, that educators need, to experiment safely with their approach to pedagogy and with their learning design and their assessment design to understand their boundaries, and therefore just to enable the institution and its students to so to thrive. So I really feel that empowering the learning process and empowering staff to respond with innovation and adaptability is at the heart of student success. So our culture really does prioritise innovation in teaching and learning across curriculum design and assessment and that sense of staff and student belonging that I was speaking about before, and that permeates all aspects of our practice. So right from that top level strategic direction through

Student Success: Flexible learning part two

Podcast transcript

to the allocation of resources or decision-making principles, our people in our culture, our engagement with the communities that we serve both regionally locally and globally. So I think it's a whole of institution approach to empowering staff and investing in our people and culture.

Kim: That joined-up approach speaking to values, mission and strategy is absolutely critical for me Lisa and something that extends right through from students to the governing body, I absolutely agree. It is always very difficult to achieve in higher education institutions. Would you say that in the last two years we've had an emergent change in our culture in relation to practices in flexible learning, teaching and assessment? And if so, how has Deakin continued to foster the culture to ensure inclusivity and agency for all?

Lisa: Thanks Kim, I think it is definitely fair to say that the international pandemic and its impact on our students and their families and their communities both on and offshore has absolutely shaped our practice as higher education professionals and providers in profound ways, and not least the rapid pivot to wholly online learning for many of our students. Now within the Deakin context, we're fortunate to have a long history of leadership and innovation in digital capability and distance education. So our saying at Deakin is that 'digital is in our DNA' and we've consistently continued to invest in those digital capabilities and fuse those with the capabilities of our physical campuses to achieve the best possible outcomes for our students. But we haven't had as far to go in terms of that pivot to wholly online learning, we've been very sophisticated in that space already. But to answer your question and address your question about pedagogical flexibility and inclusivity, one of the most important steps I think at Deakin as I referred to before is having those institutional values that embed and enable that flexibility and inclusivity. For example, our Deakin values which are in our strategic plan and include items like 'we are brave'. That means we make bold decisions, we demonstrate courage and ambition, we support personal responsibility and accountability. That's very empowering for staff. We are dynamic. That means that we are innovative and entrepreneurial, we solve problems with creativity and flexibility. We are ethical. But really importantly for the student experience, we are inclusive. So we value diversity, we embrace difference, we seek to engage and welcome all. So those values really underpin an approach to flexible and inclusive learning environments for our students. Our focus on excellence and equity in education is accompanied by a really strong institutional commitment and history focusing on greater access to higher education for aspiring students who face additional barriers. So our goal is to prioritise equity and opportunity. Our strategic plan states that we're not defined by those we exclude but by the opportunities we create and the way we do that is by communication with our stakeholders, as I mentioned before, with staff and students and by listening to both of those stakeholder groups around the way that we deliver our educational experience.

We've had a number of innovative activities happening at Deakin over the last couple of years we have launched a reimagining exams project, we are reconsidering our approaches to assessment, we are consistently committed to lifelong learning and employability, and to

social justice and to inclusivity, which particularly within the Australian context of course includes a core commitment to indigenous knowledges and equity. So we are really keen to do our best to remove barriers to a Deakin education and that really underpins our practice and we continue to do that by reshaping our approach to courses reshaping our approach to learning and teaching and assessment enhancing our student experience. We're very fortunate to have a research center at Deakin called the Centre for Research in Assessment and Digital Learning - the acronym is CRADLE - which is a really high performing international research team really at the cutting edge of scholarship in higher education research, which really informs the activities that we do around assessment and learning design.

Kim: That's a really useful analysis Lisa, and the focus on values and the commitment to continued investment in that core strategy really sounds as if it's been beneficial. It's a great segue into my next question which is how can you best democratise and empower the learning and teaching process to enable better student success without compromising staff satisfaction and wellbeing?

Lisa: Thanks Kim, this question really speaks to one of my passions which is student partnership work. We've got a very strong strategic commitment at Deakin to enabling our students as our partners in collaborative co-design of services and curriculum. So we have a range of programme offerings that really democratise that dialogue and hierarchy between staff and students including a students mentoring staff programme, we have co-design laboratories, we've got student advisory groups as well as of course student representation on university committees, but really strong co-design student advisory groups, and a whole programme of micro-grants that we deliver across the university to foster staff capability in genuine student partnership. So one of the things that I've found has been really empowering for educators and professional staff and third space staff within the higher education sphere has been that students mentoring staff programme. At Deakin we have a fairly low time commitment. It's just three one hour mentoring sessions where a student mentor meets with a staff mentee and that role reversal and that honoring the expertise of students in their lived experience as students is enormously empowering for staff. The feedback that we've received for staff is that they have valued incredibly that human connection, that relationality with students, and hearing the immediacy of the student voice in a way that is complemented by but is a more accessible than obviously our routine student feedback through student experience surveys and so on. And I've really found that approach, that student partnership approach is really effective in democratising and empowering the learning and teaching process and really boosting staff's energy and enthusiasm and morale, and relationality and connectivity with with their students.

Kim: That's so important Lisa, we hear such a lot about student wellbeing but not often quite so much about staff wellbeing and for me the two must go hand in hand. They they are two sides of one coin. So finally, what advice would you give to someone who recognises the value of what we're talking about today but perhaps doesn't have the time or space to

Student Success: Flexible learning part two

Podcast transcript

engage as thoroughly as they might like to. What are the top take home tips for colleagues to focus on which enable flexible learning to achieve student success?

Lisa: Thanks Kim well just to comment if I may about your point around student and staff wellbeing. I would like to to emphasise that here at Deakin we take a connected approach to mental health and wellbeing with a joined up strategy for both staff and students. So really ensuring that we have that collaborative, whole-of university approach to wellbeing and we also really ensure that we support our teaching staff to build successful and fulfilling careers by prioritising a culture of trust and transparency across the institution, and empowering staff to learn and develop and excel, as well as - really importantly - providing a flexible working environment for staff that is inclusive and supportive of individual circumstances, and that promotes a sustainable work and life blend. So that's not an issue that's addressed by individual staff in that it's an institutional commitment and so it's not so much a tip for individual colleagues. But it is a tip for institutions to ensure that there is an environment in which staff are aware that flexibility and inclusivity in their own practice is valued and encouraged. And that that therefore has a flow-on effect to the calibre and quality of the materials that we engage with the learning experience that we provide to our students. So my personal tips for colleagues are to insure that the student experience remains at the centre of your pedagogy and to maintain that discussion with students. The key take-home message from our students mentoring staff programme is that staff, as I said, so much valued the opportunity to hear from students about their diverse experiences. What it's really like to be a student at the university, how they experience our services and delivery, not just curriculum but also other student services and our learning management system. And really get a profound sense of the types of barriers, challenges and complexities that many of our students navigate as they are also grappling with the the rewards but also the challenges of higher education.

Kim: That's all, really great advice. Lisa thank you so much for sharing what works for Deakin and very best wishes for continued student success.

Lisa: Thank you so much. Love you to talk to you.

Kim: And just to highlight to listeners the new flexible learning literature review 2016 to 2021 and other podcasts in this series which can all be found on the Advance HE website. Thank you for listening.



Contact us

General enquiries

+44 (0) 3300 416201

enquiries@advance-he.ac.uk

www.advance-he.ac.uk

Media enquiries

+44 (0) 1904 717500

communications@advance-he.ac.uk

www.advance-he.ac.uk/contact-us

   @AdvanceHE

Advance HE helps HE and research be the best they can be.

We are a member-led, sector-owned charity that works with institutions and higher education across the world to improve higher education for staff, students and society. We are experts in higher education with a particular focus on enhancing teaching and learning, effective governance, leadership development and tackling inequalities through our equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) work.

Our strategic goals to enhance confidence and trust in HE, address systemic inequalities and advance education to meet the evolving needs of students and society, support the work of our members and the HE sector. We deliver our support through professional development programmes and events, Fellowships, awards, student surveys and research, providing strategic change and consultancy services and through membership (including accreditation of teaching and learning, equality charters, knowledge and resources).

Advance HE is a company limited by guarantee registered in England and Wales no. 04931031. Registered as a charity in England and Wales no. 1101607 Registered as a charity in Scotland no. SC043946. The Advance HE logo should not be used without our permission.

© 2022 Advance HE. All rights reserved.

The views expressed in this publication are those of the author and not necessarily those of Advance HE. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or any storage and retrieval system without the written permission of the copyright owner. Such permission will normally be granted for non-commercial, educational purposes provided that due acknowledgement is given.

To request copies of this report in large print or in a different format, please contact the Marketing and Communications Team at Advance HE:

+44 (0) 3300 416201 or publications@advance-he.ac.uk