**Personalised Student Support Plans: Examining the Effectiveness of Support Recommendations made by Students**

**Janet:**

Cathryn, I think a good place to start would be for you to tell me how you got involved in a scholarship project.

**Cathryn:**

OK, so the reason why I got involved was because in a previous academic year I identified that there was a number of students who were deferring the module, and I didn’t realise why they were deferring the module. So, as a tutor we will get a notification that a student has left the module, but we don’t know the reasons why, and when there was a number of students leaving, I felt it was important to understand the reason for this. Was it a subject specific reason or was it a personal reason? and why I wanted to understand that was so I could support them more suitably. So, I put together the eSTEeM project to work more closely with students to provide them with the type of

support that they want and to hopefully improve retention on the module, just through understanding their needs really.

**Janet:**

So, how did you actually go about? What kind of questions were you looking to pose to the students? What kind of information were you trying to collect?

**Cathryn:**

So, the way I carried out my project was to perform a survey and to ask them how they wanted to be supported by their tutor throughout the academic year. So, I used a Jisc survey to do that and when I collected that information, I was able to find out how the students want to be supported and this was in ways such as interactive chat periodically throughout the academic year. Students also prepared diaries for me and shared those, and we participated in group sessions. So, these sessions were beyond what we would normally do as an OU tutor.

**Janet:**

So, you prepared these surveys, sent them out to the students, who very kindly went ahead and filled them in. But what kind of answers were you getting, you know, without being person specific, why were people deferring? What, was kind of turning people off and what keeps people turned on?

**Cathryn:**

Well, the interesting thing about this is that the students who engage with me are generally the students who don’t defer the module. So, the students who were leaving the module didn’t tell me the reasons why. So, through increasing the amount of support that I was offering the students the goal was to improve retention. So, that I wasn’t having students leave the module so, I wouldn’t need to understand the reasons why students were leaving. So, that was really what I got back from the, the survey results.

**Janet:**

So, once you’d sort of collected the results of your survey and the results of your data, how did you then kind of play that out into any kind of changes or differences that you felt you could make?

**Cathryn:**

OK. So, after I’d collected the initial survey which was carried out in October 2019, and I asked students how do you want to be supported throughout this academic year? and I supported them using an Open Source tool, Slack, and I also supported them using diaries and Skype as well. So, really what I was trying to do was to reduce the barrier between the students and me, and I made myself available every day, they knew I was online. They may not talk to me, but they knew I was there and we executed that throughout the academic year, and I reviewed the suitability of the approach in January 2020 to give students the opportunity to change the way in which they were being supported. Funnily enough, no students did want to change and the majority of them did stay with me throughout the academic year. A very positive result was that there were no students who deferred the module in this academic year, and even though there was only a minority of students who did actually engage in practice, it may have been just the fact that they knew that this support was available encouraged the wider group to stay on the module.

**Janet:**

OK. So, that’s a fantastic result. So, even though you may have had this kind of cohort of very actively engaged people, do you think there were a lot of sort of students who were kind of sleeping or creeping around in the background but were aware that the facility was there and that something slightly different was happening, and they could kind in sneak in and appear without actually appearing in the flesh as it were?

**Cathryn:**

Yeah, I do. I think that was exactly the way it was. Although I did get some feedback in June 2020, that students had forgotten that they were able to join the programme midway through. So, I did have some change in the participants across the academic year. So, I had another couple of students join the programme who didn’t originally sign up. But I do believe that it was that they knew that I was there, and I think also the fact that they knew I was interested in them personally. It wasn’t just about can I get you through this module, but actually that I care if you’re not sleeping at night, or I care if you have been laid off from your job, for example, and I think just that, that awareness for them, they like that.

**Janet:**

Yeah. I mean that’s a fantastic example of pastoral care. So, what kind of return was there for you, what kind of a buzz did you get out of implementing this?

**Cathryn:**

So, because The Open University is my primary employment, so I don’t have an office where students can come and knock my door, and I do miss that interaction, that face-to-face interaction with the students throughout the day. So, in creating a virtual classroom it opened that up to me again. That I had students who were coming to me at 8 o’clock at night, you know, just to talk. It may have been subject specific, or it may not have been, and it just provided me that relationship with my students, that my students can also get with me.

**Janet:**

So, let’s just think about where we are now, you and I are having this conversation online and the new normal world that we, we now live in or going into. Was this communication between you and the students done via text onscreen, emails, that kind of thing or was there any audio? Or even going forward, do you think that you might engage through video?

**Cathryn:**

Well, in my tutor sessions with the OU I do use my video but the primary tool I used for this programme was Slack. So, that’s a web-based programme and whenever you’re online I just have a tab open with my Slack wall in there so students can all see that I’m green, I’m online, I’m there, and we have a general channel in there so everybody who’s a member of the Slack group can participate in the general channel and then we also have private channels. So, I will have a private channel between me and an individual student as well. So, there was multiple strands of communication going on within Slack and I think really everybody was happy with just text-based chat. I think whenever we’re working at home and we have other things going on in our lives, it’s easier to chat through text as opposed to turning on a video camera and talking orally. So, from my perspective it did the job and I think from a student’s perspective it did too.

**Janet:**

So, Cathryn, where are you going next now? So, are you going to write these results up, presents these results? Is it, in terms of student retention, I mean it’s great for The Open University. Do you think this is something that, that you would like to kind of see possibly rolled out across other modules?

**Cathryn:**

Yeah. So, one of the other reasons why I became involved in the eSTEeM programme was because as an AL, you generally don’t get that many opportunities to publish research, and of course, it’s very important to stay research active. So, through eSTEeM I’ve been able to get my results out into the community. So, I presented at the eSTEeM Conference in April and I’m also presenting at the Advance HE Conference in July, virtually, and then I do hope to prepare some journal papers based on the results that I’ve collected from this programme, and then looking forward, I have put in another proposal to eSTEeM on how to take this project forward. So, based on the fact that the

results show that it was the stronger performing cohort that engaged with me, I want to take

this to the next level now and to understand why did the lower performing cohort not engage,

and what can I do to encourage them to interact with me more closely.

**Janet:**

Yeah, best of luck with that. It sounds like a fantastic project. So, you’ve already picked the low hanging fruit and, and now you’re going after the fruit that’s a little bit more difficult to reach higher

up on the tree, as it were.

So, it’s obviously been a fantastic experience for you as a scholarship experience and great that the publications are coming from it. So, what kind of advice would you

give to other people who were thinking, oh yeah, I’ve got this kind of idea, what should

I do, how should I go about it? Is it worthwhile? Where’s it going to take me personally?

**Cathryn:**

Yeah. I would definitely advise anybody to go for it if they do have a good idea. The eSTEeM team is brilliant in supporting that. I had a mentor throughout the year and I really would have been lost without my mentor. It was a very active mentor and we talked monthly about how the project was going and give advice and support, and especially even at the beginning of the project in getting ethical approval and assurance, you know, everything was correct from that perspective. The mentor was really fundamental in doing that.

**Janet:**

Cathryn, wish you every success with the project going forward and thanks for talking to us about a really brilliant piece of eSTEeM scholarship. Thank you.

**Cathryn:**

Thank you so much.