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Voiceover [00:00:02] This podcast is brought to you by the University of Aberdeen.

Bekah Walker [00:00:07] Hello and welcome back to our Bewell podcasts. Our episode today is being recorded as part of the university's events scheduled for Disability History Month, where the theme is access: how far we've come, how far have we to go? Joining me today I have Abbe Brown, Dean of Student Support and students Sian and Bea. Can we do some quick introductions to our listeners just so they know who you are and why you volunteered to take part in the podcast.

Abbe Brown [00:00:33] Sure. So my name's Abbe Brown and I'm a professor in the law school and I'm the university dean for student support, and I'm really looking forward to our discussion today. Thanks.

Sian Wallace [00:00:43] I am Sian Wallace. I'm a third year English and film with visual culture student and my role within the Disabled Students Forum is sports and education officer. And I wanted to take part in the podcast in order to reach out to students as part of the forum and let them know how we can represent them and their concerns.

Bea [00:01:12] My name is Bea and I am a third year linguistics student. I am the convenor of the Disabled Students Forum and I wanted to join this podcast to again, represent the forum and kind of like give exposure to other disabled students who might not know about us or about what we do.

Bekah Walker [00:01:46] Brilliant. Thanks so much, guys, for joining me. I really appreciate giving up your time. So, we know that the ongoing coronavirus pandemic has brought many challenges and has particularly been challenging for our disabled community. Support services have been reduced and access to online learning has been tough. How has the universities blended learning approach affected you as a student with a disability?

Bea [00:02:10] So for me, there has been no blend about the situation, it's been completely online and to an extent I understand why the university marketed it as blended learning. But I didn't realise that online learning would be as tough as it was. And to its credit, the university has made online learning relatively accessible, so I'm really glad that all my lectures, almost all the lectures, have had captions, for example, because it makes them so much easier to follow. And lecturers have been going in and editing the captions and making sure that if there's specific terms that the capturing software doesn't pick up, they go in and edit them and you know what they're talking about. But I actually did go home quite a long time ago because I was having a lot of trouble with the way that blended learning was structured.

Sian Wallace [00:03:32] Yeah, I wanted for Bea to begin, and mainly because I wanted to make sure that I wasn't the only one who had courses entirely online because a lot of, different courses have different structures. But, I found with a lot of the humanities and schools, it's all been completely online. And you'd think that would make it easier because you don't have half as much time trying to focus on work. But it's very exhausting, actually working online the whole time. So, I have heard stories of people going home early because, yeah, it's just absolutely draining a lot of the time. But again, we've only had sort of minor issues with accessibility, things like caption glitches and my lecturers personally

have been very approachable, if you have any sort of issue with the content that's on the call, or with actually accessing content that it's online and for each class.

Abbe Brown [00:04:45] Great. I just come in on that, obviously, I don't have experience as a student. I have been delivering from the other side of the fence. Yeah, I think as both Shan and Bea have said, it does really vary. The university has really aimed to provide blended learning. But as has been said, that hasn't happened for all students and from all courses. I personally have been on campus at 8am quite a few mornings, so it is happening for some. But I know some students also feel that perhaps it wasn't made clear enough quickly enough, exactly what was hoped and was going to be able to be delivered for this term. And that's absolutely something that we are thinking of for next term as well. I think from our experience one thing we're really trying to do and trying to work with our students as much as we can is to I think, as Sian says, you think flexibility is great and flexibility is great up to a point, but actually have a total lack of structure can sometimes be a real challenge. So really tried to balance that flexibility because everyone has totally different commitments, you know, dodgy IT connections, caring responsibilities with the fact that actually might be quite useful to know all your students might gather on one particular time in the week and to perhaps offer that or suggest to students that something that they might want to raise. And I do know then for some students who have chosen to return physically to campus, there's been some other opportunities. The library has been open, some campus spaces have been open. Some people find that really great because that can provide a structure and some human interaction. I do know that for some students to particularly, for example, who may use a chair, that that's a particular level of difficulty as well. So we're really, really trying to, you know, work with the forum and with other students to share how we can solve as many of those problems as we can.

Bekah Walker [00:06:38] Yeah, I think that the isolation of the remote learning has had a massive, massive impact on mental health and particularly those who have mental ill health. Do you think that the stigma attached to mental health prevents people from seeking help? And how detrimental is this to them and their learning and their whole self, really?

Sian Wallace [00:07:06] As somebody who suffers from some issues to do with mental health it's sometimes very difficult if you're completely on your own and isolated to actually tell that you are ill. So you kind of don't really go to seek help until it's gotten like the worst it could get. And that's the difficult part of being able to signpost the people like, you know, the signs of when it's actually starting to go downhill earlier, I suppose. Because that's the issue that I've only been living with one other person. So we kind of we're able to kind of keep an eye on each other and balance each other out because you're both having a bad day it's really hard to you know, keep everybody sane not to use an inappropriate term there.

Bea [00:07:58] Yeah, it is it is quite, quite difficult because often, I mean, we've all heard the phrase like, oh, imagine if mental health was treated like physical health, but then again, if physical health isn't always treated as a serious issue. But also, there are times like when someone might just be having a bad day, maybe something bad has happened to them, they will get sad and even then, a lot of people don't understand that mental illness just isn't the same as having a bad day because something happened to you. And especially with the pandemic, this is such an ongoing thing that if you are living alone, like Shan said, it can be so difficult to know how to adjust because if you keep feeling awful for so many days, that becomes your "new normal" because the pandemic has become the new normal. And so you just feel awful for ages and you might not like feel like you can get

or “deserve the help”, because you assume this is how it has to be because of the state of the world.

Abbe Brown [00:09:52] I think one thing that that I perceived on it, yeah, undoubtedly across the student body, we're seeing an increase in mental health issues across staff and across society. I guess perhaps what we are also seeing, though, is certainly increased reference to mental health and increased recognition that this is an issue. That doesn't mean it's always being solved. It's not necessarily getting all the attention it deserves, absolutely. But I think perhaps across society, we are seeing a lot more conversations about it and a lot more recognition that this is actually something which happens. So, I think that is a positive, is overstating it, but I think that is a good thing, perhaps from previous years when it was much less spoken about. Providing support in lockdown is again particularly difficult. All the university support services and external services are open, but they're operating remotely. The counselling services are open. But if you've returned home and that's outside the UK, they don't work. So there are there are some twists there and there are some online resources, like Big White Wall and Togetherall. One thing I think that and again, I would like to know what Bea and Shan think about this, because it's such an important thing, I think is communicating the support which is available and is that done in the most effective way, including as well, of course. Is it the most effective support? But the university has set up a 24/7 support line going through the winter break. So we hope that will provide some support for students in this particularly challenging time as well as, you know, there's been self isolation toolkits and winter break toolkits I think they'll go some way to helping. I really like the point though, is this the new normal and what is helping with the new new normal? What is actually this new new normal is not that is when people should be encouraged to seek support? And how can one interact and encourage people to call for help or try to provide support or signpost help in the most effective way.

Bekah Walker [00:12:07] Yeah, I think it is absolutely right what you're saying, and I think it is really key to highlight that, although a lot of people have been struggling with their mental health in lockdown, there is a difference between kind of mental well-being and mental ill health. And I think it is trying to differentiate between the two. Of course, there's a lot of similarities, but there is a difference with someone who is struggling with mental ill health. They might need more additional support. And as you say, it's when it's continuous, not just like having the one off bad day as such. I think that it's really important to you to kind of point that out. And I mean, I was having a conversation with someone the other day and they were talking about how the support has been great throughout lockdown in terms of support for mental health, but that mental health also existed before the coronavirus pandemic, that it was an issue. And a lot of the support that's being pushed out to people throughout probably the whole world is relating to coronavirus and it's almost undermining those who were suffering with their mental health before the pandemic hit.

Bea [00:13:23] Yeah, I was thinking we can draw, like, quite an interesting parallel between the phenomenon of, like, everyone's mental health dropping like a rock for ages. And now we're seeing so many services being rolled out talking more about this. And that's very big parallel with the cycle of how accessibility services seem to work, because there's is the view that only a few people need this, therefore we are not going to provide it. And then on the flipside of that, when there's suddenly a demand, then people get it, but there was never any reason to leave out the ten people that needed something specific when it was only them.

Sian Wallace [00:14:23] I was just thinking about a discussion that I've had with my family or in fact, with my neighbours, because my neighbour is a lecturer at another university and he was talking about all these online resources that they suddenly had to use during the pandemic, which at Aberdeen University Blackboard is the tool, like Aberdeen University has been using Blackboard since I joined university. So for me it wasn't a new thing, whereas it's just like a sudden surge in this need for this kind of accessibility. And people are like, oh, this is a thing that it's always has been there. It's just now that now it is in desperate need. Like people are like, oh, we should do this. Because that kind of structure should be there, like for the people that need it anyway. And then you can build on it from there, because a lot of us have had to start from the ground up in terms of building this new online accessibility, like it's been a lot harder.

Abbe Brown [00:15:34] I absolutely agree. And I think we can see a couple of strands, one from my own research, which is about basic intellectual property rights, developing vaccines, the laws relating to that and the whole debates about who rewards, who shares we're seeing on covid. But we've seen this for every other international health crisis ever AIDS, Ebola, Malaria. But there's been a lot of different approaches because this is covid, it's global, it's affecting the west, it's affecting the north and how everyone wants to do it. And I think this is exactly the same point which me and Shan are showing, a lot of things which are being done. Yeah we have Blackboard, I think it's fair to say probably all members of staff didn't explore it to its fullest potential. And they are now, they've been pushed to do that. Like, they shouldn't have had to be pushed to do that. But everyone is balancing so many different things. And so I think try to be positive about it. You know, a lot of lessons have been learnt that these things really should continue. And I think also I know the point's been made and I hope you're going to make this me again, but the things like extension's flexibility, different forms of assessment that a lot of students have been calling that for the past and that's been difficult. Now, of course, it's still difficult, but to be pushed to do it through the pandemic has enabled new options to be identified. And I think it's really important that everyone continues to work together to ensure that we can maintain the best of that, as well as, of course, reflecting on what of the old world, if we ever were to return to any element of that may also be worth considering.

Bea [00:17:17] Yeah Abbe was talking about extensions. You might be aware that I think what has happened in the uni and a lot of other unis across the UK is that a lot of people are getting extensions to an extent that everyone on the course gets like a soft extension granted by their course co-ordinator. But disabled students needs, as far as I can tell, haven't really been taken into account in that respect. Or that's what like people who I know have been saying because as far as I can see, the disabled students, if they would normally need a one week or one day extension because of their needs, that's been granted to everyone but for the pandemic. But they're still experiencing a pandemic and they have the needs. So, I'm not really sure what's going on there.

Sian Wallace [00:18:35] The ordinary struggle of living in lockdown, but then also having your needs is something else that we need to take into account. Because I was going to say in my English course, I think I don't know whether it's just for disabled students or for the entire student body, but I think it came into force last year that we could get an automatic week's extension if we missed the deadline for our assessment. And knowing that that's there without having to ask for is really helpful. So I don't know whether something like that might be useful in other disciplines. Also, my phone coordinator has been really approachable in terms if you only need a day or so, if you just send her an email like that can be granted like as soon as you need it, rather than have to go through a huge, long winded process in terms of access to that extra time.

Abbe Brown [00:19:47] Yeah, I think I think there's a couple a couple of strands here and it's so important. I think there's a point of if people for any reasons that we're also looking at looking beyond the disability in relation to granting extensions, and for that to be clear, for that to be straightforward for that, for that to be flexible and absolutely agree with that. What we have seen is a lot of change when we've moved in the main, other than for extreme regulatory reasons, from closed book exams to more ongoing forms of assessment, is and it's such an interesting question, the focus has been very much and we've been really working with the disability team on this is to ensure that the term which is set for completion of the assessment is genuinely inclusive. So it's varied on the May diet and then assessments over this term were just finishing. But very broadly, a piece of work might be expected to take, say, three hours. And if you did that examine for example it would say take three hours. And often the decision is being made, OK, we're going to give everyone a week or we're going to give everyone two weeks. And the aim is very much of that really is inclusive for everyone. I know that can be perceived as that is taking away from the disabled student or for other needs, but the aim has been very much to ensure that this really is only supposed to take two or three hours, but we are giving two weeks now that that may be to take into account the disabled need. It may be because your wi-fi has gone or maybe because you are caring. And I do think that that is that is appropriate. And strong advice for that is those are really good in terms of practise. I think the really important thing is to ensure that is really being made as clear as it can and we're collaborators as we can and getting that message out. And I think there probably still is some work to do there. And I definitely do know and I suspect I would be quite relieved I'm not having to do assessments in this period if I had a week to do an assessment. It's very tempting to take a week to do the assessment. And if there's a perception that everyone else is taking the week to do the assessments, then I can see people who would normally get extra time, if it was an example, feeling that they are being disadvantaged. But I do know that colleagues are making it really clear that the expectations is, if it takes three hours, that this what is expected. Sometimes it depends on the discipline. Sometimes there's a word limit, which is indicative, lots of clarity as to the marking guidance to be made clear that this really is not expected to take you a week or two weeks or two days what whatever it is. But I absolutely take the point that it's really, really important and there probably is still some more work and really clarifying what is being done. Because it there's one thing I think to make I have to say, I do think is the appropriate decision. Another thing to ensure that everyone does see that we really are trying to make it fair. And I really welcome any thoughts that Bea and Sian have on that.

Bekah Walker [00:22:54] Yeah, I think that's been one of the advantages of the online learning is that there's been so many different opportunities for everyone to take advantage of whether it be have more time to focus on your assessment and to really kind of get the best out of the work that you've got. And I do think that the extra time being allowed for others is so important because as you say, like there's been many times when I've been in meetings and my wi-fi has cut off and, you know, you miss part of that. And it'd be really unfair to disadvantage a student through something that they have no control over, whether it's their internet access, you just you just never know. And I guess the important thing for me is that you often don't know the struggles that everyone is going through. So it's really important that our academic staff are supporting each and every student through their own needs really to help them get through this period and going forward. So I wonder if you guys have had any other positive experiences from being at home. Has there been any opportunities, advantages to this way of learning?

Bea [00:24:10] Um, I've been quite heavily involved in a campaign for better student accommodation for disabled students, which is something that I don't think I would have the confidence to speak about if it was in person and things like that. I went to a National Union of Students conference, quite early on in lockdown as well, which is something because it's a national conference and there's lots of people, I don't think I would have had the physical energy or the confidence to actually attend those kinds of large scale, national events, so for me, it's been quite an open opportunity.

Abbe Brown [00:25:03] Yeah, I guess from my side, I've really enjoyed, as well as it being slightly scary yet really, as I say, to have been pushed to really take advantage of say the Blackboard which we call MyAberdeen and teaching opportunities, the joy to split one's class into breakout rooms and to have brought them back again and not left anyone in cyberspace is a huge personal kick. I've seen real enthusiasm from students when they realise that they have not been left in cyberspace, and that has unlocked a lot of discussion. We've worked together to learn exactly how to use an interactive whiteboard together and maybe some students who don't like so much speaking in class, I must confess, in my campus based classes, I'm very keen and, you know, hopefully a supportive manner, encouraging everyone to speak. Some people really would rather not speak. And so say being in the white board or being able to use the chat function more, being able to use automated polls, more can, I think, be a really, really good way of challenging us all in new ways and perhaps also enabling others as others to thrive. So I think that's really good. I think although it's a shame not to be able to teach on campus and it's a shame not to be able to go to teaching and learning conferences and to research conferences across the UK, across the world. Equally, I think I probably participated in many more discussions. I do remember and it seems a lifetime ago, but in April and being part of discussions with colleagues at universities who are in Hong Kong who'd gone through the unrest there, who'd had their campuses closed, being able to speak to them about how things were going, posing them questions about disability and how they had faced with that. I would not have gone on a plane to go to Hong Kong for environmental, cash, time reasons, all of those things. So it's been really, really great. And I think as Sian has said a lot of the discussions with students from across the university, with colleagues from different parts of the university, we have all had to change. And in some ways, although I think we probably all agree that many of us also spend far too long on teams for now and all sorts of other different platforms. It can be easier maybe to have a dialogue to start something to say, you know, how might we be able to address these different perspectives? How might we be able to work together to meet this new challenge in perhaps a way that it might be hard to do in person? Equally, you lose the informal quick chat as you're coming out of the room. So there's a lot there's lots of differences.

Sian Wallace [00:27:42] But I think the informality comes in a different form though, as well. Just like if there's technical difficulties, you're kind of laughing that off as it starts to, you know, happen. And yeah, I think it's still quite actually in some ways, it can be even more informal than just the kind of in-person chats and those kinds of things, but yeah.

Abbe Brown [00:28:08] Yeah, I think the parallel meeting in the chat function, for example, I think is just very different and I can be genuinely affected. You know, it is a parallel conversation while the main meeting is able to take place and someone can intervene immediately rather than having to wait for the next meeting or to follow up in writing. So I think there are a lot of advantages. We probably would never have wanted to be here, but we've been forced and I think we shouldn't have always needed to have been forced. But we have been forced sometimes. Of course, we had to stop because of not been helpful from the disability support side, too. And but hopefully that we can as we

move further to a new new normal wherever we are in the news, and to really retain them to really strong progress and new practices and a new engagement with we've been able to build.

Bekah Walker [00:29:00] Absolutely, I think there has been a lot of positives and as you say, there has been so many different ways of getting people to engage. And like you say, the kind of chat function on teams is really, really great for those who maybe don't have the confidence to speak up in a meeting or a lecture that their opinion is still valuable that they can put it in that way. It's also a way to get them engaged in the conversation. They pop their opinion in and so then you can open up the conversation and the meeting or the forum, whatever forum you're in, to let that person have their say, which I think is really great because some people just would not think, oh, I want to share my opinion in that way. Bea have you had any experiences?

Bea [00:29:44] I have I do like being able to go to events online, but I view the Zoom's and Teams fatigue has just gotten so bad in the last few months. And it's just ever present. And, so I try and avoid a lot of events, which is kind of hypocritical of you to say, it's like I'm in a lot of societies and I like when people are up to events. But then again, I understand why not as many people might be coming to events now, because it just is so tiring to attend from a processing perspective and capacity, point of view instead of having to walk to be that.

Sian Wallace [00:30:43] Yeah, like I found, I guess it's less like that now because I'm at home and it's got a lot more opportunity to kind of relax and recuperate. But when I was working in my flat in Aberdeen, I had this tendency to attend my, like, online classes and then do nothing for the rest of the day, like no social interaction, just blank out because I would just be so exhausted and I would personally end up with no mental energy or anything left anymore.

Bekah Walker [00:31:19] Yeah, absolutely. I completely concur with what you're saying. The team's fatigue is 100 percent real. And I've found myself certainly when lockdown first happened, I'd have friends that would be like, oh, shall we have like a Zoom call? And I honestly couldn't do I was like, no, I've spent all day, like on a screen. And as much as I wanted to chat to my friends, it just wasn't the same. And I really struggled with speaking to them online. So that kind of leads me on quite nicely to has there been any support services and resources that you can recommend to our listeners that have helped you, for those that maybe struggling with getting reasonable adjustments in place or being able to access support? Do you have any advice for anyone that could be struggling?

Bea [00:32:10] I would say, I personally do have a lot of internalised negativity about getting myself an extension, and if I've been listening, I can understand if you feel like that too, but if anyone needs an extension, it's now. And a ton of lecturers and tutors are being really understanding of the hell we are all going through. And, so what I say is don't like be scared of asking for extensions, because it is very likely that you will get it. I'm not sure if I have any other support recommendations to give.

Sian Wallace [00:33:21] What I would say would be, I guess what really got me through my course was using any time to email my tutors or my lecturers and just arrange some sort of call or just an email back and forth, if you got any questions they are still there. There's still people that you can go and speak to even if you don't have an in-person office hour, because my tutors, they both had like a teams meeting set up within the same sort of time frame as their usual office hours that was I found really helpful just to talk about you

kind of idea for a piece of coursework or anything you're worried about as you go along with the material, that kind of thing.

Abbe Brown [00:34:14] And again, I guess I'm on the other side of the discussion here again. But, yeah, I couldn't agree more, whether we're academics in terms of delivering, teaching, learning, whether it's with our personal tutor hat on, whether it's our or specialist student support and counselling team, we really are here. We really do want to help. We're very much aware that we should be as proactive as we can in making it clear that students shouldn't have to ask and things should work. But if students are struggling and that can be an extension, that can be if you're from Aberdeen, you will know the C6, if you're listening from outside Aberdeen, it's our kind of warning system from the academic side of things. That's an event has been missed. Please, please do get in touch with your personal tutor or with your course organiser and ask for help and ask for guidance. And obviously, I can't answer for every circumstance, but I'm pretty sure it will be provided. I know and Bea and Sian will be able to speak much more effectively to this, but I know that things can seem a little bit overwhelming. And you're getting all these emails and you don't quite know what they mean. But it's our job to help you and to try to unpick that. So please, please do think about contacting us, and of course, there has been fantastic work done by the forum and AUSA and other groups.

Bekah Walker [00:35:44] Yeah, I think that's absolutely key, that if anyone is struggling and they're unsure of the support available, if they're struggling to access anything, there really is so many people at the university that that want to help you. We're here to make your life easier, not any more challenging than it already is. So please, please, please reach out if you are struggling. I would just like to round up by saying thank you so much to Abby, Sian and Bea for joining me today and sharing your stories and experiences. It's been great chatting with you. I will leave details of the Student Disabilities Forum and the comments for anyone that would like more information about the group or to join the group. Please get in touch with them. Thank you to you, our listeners, for tuning in. I hope you've enjoyed the episode. Take care and I'll speak to you all soon.

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