

Student Experience Podcast

S1 E6 Dr Cathy Stone

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SPEAKERS

Tanya R, Cathy Stone

Tanya R 00:00

Welcome to today's podcast. Today we have Dr. Cathy stone joining us. Kathy is a consultant, a researcher focusing on student equity and student success within post secondary education. She's also a conjoint, associate professor at the University of Newcastle in Australia. And as an adjunct Research Fellow with the National Center for Student Equity in higher education at Curtin University. Kathy has been closely involved in the development and the provision of strict strategies to enhance student success in the higher education sector since 1994. And has a long standing commitment to student equity, widening participation, and improving the experience and outcomes for increasingly diverse student cohorts both in the online and on campus environment. Kathy has a strong research background in the area of mature age, first in family and online students, and she was awarded an equity scholarship in 2016. By the NCSEHE, during which she investigated strategies that contribute to the excess participation and success of students in online undergraduate education. Kathy is a recipient of the Charic citation for Outstanding Contribution to student learning. She's a lifetime fellow and former president of the Australian and New Zealand Student Services Association, and has been co editors professional journal, JANSAs, since 2008. She's also accredited as a mental health social worker by the Australian Association of Social Workers. Welcome, Kathy.

Cathy Stone 01:42

Thank you very much, Tanya.

Tanya R 01:45

I feel exhausted just reading all that.

Cathy Stone 01:48

No, I'm slightly embarrassed that, that there was so much to say I probably should have cut it down a bit.

Tanya R 01:53

That's okay. The thing is, um, you come from a really broad range of experiences, and you have a lot of, you know, quality outcomes that you're producing in this area, which is one of the reasons why we really wanted to have you on board. I know I personally get so much out of your research, particularly in the student equity and success area. And I know you do a lot of consulting work in this area, too. So in the risk of oversimplifying what is a complex challenge, what would be perhaps the first three things that an individual or an organization should consider if they want to improve student outcomes?

Cathy Stone 02:32

Yeah, sure. And look at it that is a some complex question. But in a way, there is a fairly simple answer to that. And I think that the key thing is, is really about knowing who the students are. This is something I bang on about endlessly, who are our students? And, you know, let's really know who they are. Because primarily, they're no longer you know, the high school leaver, yes, we still have plenty of those. But there is a very diverse cohort of students now at university. And that's thanks to widening participation, it's great that there is such a wider cohort. Unfortunately, though, it's often not well understood how diverse his cohort is. So often, university policies and processes are still treating all students as if they're high school leavers. As if they are not adults with rich busy lives, as if they're not, you know, being working in the workforce for a long time as if they're not also caring for families and aging parents. So we're talking about adult learners with very rich for busy lives, a lot of the time in university now, they bring with them a lot of skills, a lot of strengths, which are often underestimated often never asked about. And often what is seen by the institution is their lack of confidence, or their lack of familiarity with academic language and academic expectations. So it's all too easy to adopt a deficit mode with this very diverse cohort, or they can't do this, they can't do that. But there are so many things they can do. And I think that with sufficient encouragement, support information and asking them about themselves and getting them to contribute in really meaningful ways to class discussions and assessment tasks, and so on, from their own background of experience can make a huge difference. So I know that's kind of a bit pie in the sky. But I do think that's the crucial thing of and a lot of university teaching staff are really good at this now at really having a look at their cohort of students saying okay, who have I got here, you know, and understanding that Okay, I've got a quite a lot of mature age students here I've got students from different cultural backgrounds and so on. And you know, as you said before, my a lot of my experiences is with online as well as the face to face So that's harder in the online environment. And we'll get onto that in a minute. But I think, you know, key point one really tried to get a grasp of who the students are. And that needs to be on an institution wide basis. So I still, you know, meet people working in universities, who talk about the students as kids. Every time that staggers me because I think, Well, you know, who are these kids are talking about, but anyway, so that's the first thing, I admit,

Tanya R 05:31

often the the lecturer is younger than the students.

Cathy Stone 05:35

Absolutely. And I think, you know, most lecturers will, are the first to acknowledge that the mature age students in that classroom setting contribute an enormous amount, and usually highly motivated. Just very strong work ethic. And, you know, they may struggle, as I say, with some of the academic

expectations, and so on, but they're there, their motivation is strong, and they're therefore strong, you know, their motivation is strong, because they're there for often for very practical reasons, they want a better job, they want to be able to support their family, they want to, you know, increase their to move up to the next stage in their career. So they're very focused usually, and often, coming from that very focused motivation, then that love of learning sometimes develops a bit later that they get to university. And they think, oh, wow, I thought I was just coming here to get a better job. But actually, I really love this. And so it's, it's great to see that happen. And that needs to be fostered and nurtured. But I suppose the second point is about communication. So, you know, first of all, get a handle on who the students are who, what is this cohort, how it mixes and, and what are they? What are they bringing with them? And what do they need. And the second point is about communication. And, you know, nowadays, I think, because they're not just all school leavers who were used to the teacher at the front of the class, communication is, is huge. So it teacher to student student, to student, institution to students. And I think so much communication now is done digitally, it's almost all done digitally, really, except for face to face teaching when when students are coming on campus, but all other communications from the institution are digital. So it needs to be personalized, targeted, it needs to be meaningful, relevant to them. So that they, it's about developing a sense of belonging, it's about feeling, okay, this institution, or these staff, these people, they're, they know who I am. And that's great, because I feel good about that. And I feel as if this is a place I want to belong to. So it is about building up that sense of belonging through communication and the right sort of communication. So that would be the second point. And the third point I sort of alluded to, in my first point really, is about student processes and policies being appropriate for the needs of adult learners. So whoever the student is, the policies and processes need to be designed with a diverse cohort in mind. So for instance, one of the things that add sort of maturity students often come up against is some quite rigid policies around assessment extensions, and so on. A lot of Regional students really struggle with this having to get a step deck signed by a JP or whoever, and, and, you know, they're, they're finishing off an assessment, their kids sick, or, or they're called into work for an extra shift that they can't afford to say no to. So it's going to put them back by a day or so. And it may, they may only need a day or so. And, you know, I've had so many students say to me, Look, I just want to be able to ring the lecture up and say, Can I just had it in tomorrow, I'm nearly there. But I've had this happen. And an awful lot of lecturers where they can a fantastic about that and say, Yes, sure, that's fine. Just get it to me as soon as you can. But sometimes they're working in a system themselves, which is very rigid. And they they're prevented from doing that by rigid policies and processes. So they say, Look, I'm sorry, I'd like to be able to do that. But I actually have to have a medical certificate, which wastes more precious time by, you know, going to the doctor to get a medical certificate for something that actually didn't leave the doctor's visit. Anyway, that's just one little example. But there's been quite a lot written about this in terms of, you know, there was a great paper by it. It's Greenland and more or more in Greenland. I get that I get sometimes they write, you know, they write together a lot. And they wrote a great paper on employment driven attrition amongst online students. In the sense that a lack of recognition by the institution that employment for these students has to come first. And I guess that's the thing about this diverse cohort, it's about a student, understanding the student identity, their identity is not going to be student for first and foremost, foremost, it can't be for most of them. It's parent first, employees, second, student third, or whatever it happens to be. So you know, there are more pressing priorities. And while they would, very often would love to be able to put their studies top of the list, they literally can't, because they have responsibilities for others, and they have responsibility to earn money in order to support others, and

then their studies. So I guess it's Yeah, so they'd be the three things that that I would say, are really important.

Tanya R 10:56

Cool. And so based on your experience, I guess, you talked a bit about in terms of processes, and that, what are some of the biggest internal challenges that higher education providers need to address in order to, you know, be able to actually address those points?

Cathy Stone 11:12

Yep. Look, I think one of the biggest internal challenges is that the very, you know, siloed nature of universities that that we all aware of all talk about. And it's very hard sometimes for the, you know, the left handed out with the right hands doing. So students often get inundated with communication from all different areas. And, you know, that can be good. But it can be really bad, because sometimes it's conflicting. And often it means that students just don't read their emails, because they're getting stuff that's not relevant for them. So they miss the stuff that is relevant. So it does, there does need to be, I mean, one of the things that that I've talked about a lot is developing the collaboration and coordination across the university on an institution wide basis, so that it's not different areas of the universities all doing their own thing. And, look, that's a really hard one. There, the Open University in the UK, came up with a very innovative approach to this, where they basically did an enormous restructure a few years ago. And they created these discipline based teams where, for instance, we might have now as the world like the School of Humanities and Social Science that I'm attached to at the University of Newcastle. That became like the, for example, the discipline team, so for social science and humanities, budding, rather than it being just the academics, it also includes administrative support staff, library staff, technology, staff, learning designers, so that there's a genuine teamwork happening. And, you know, the the Open University has done this, I think very successfully from from from visits that I've had, there, were just as an example, you know, the usual emails that go out saying, you know, it's assessment time, you know, if you need any help contacts, this, that the other, which is great. And that's often sent out centrally, at a certain time of the semester, when, as a genuine attempt, maybe by maybe being sent out by a student retention success team or something like that. What happens is that often the, the, the schools or faculties don't necessarily know that's going out, they may have been told, but it doesn't really reach the goal, a lot of other things to think about. And it's not particularly targeted, whereas what they do, that the Open University is, within their discipline based teams, they that there's a university wide intervention program in terms of their communications, but they're all tailored within the individual team. So for instance, if it's a biology, discipline, then the the email that will go out will say, now you're about to start your and it's the particular assessment, you know, your assessments on this. And here are some pointers to you know, to send you in the right direction for that. So it's just much more relevant and targeted. So one example that in horticulture that someone gave me at the Open University was, you know, it's time to grow your tomato seeds. So it's, it's, it's just very specific, and of course, then it's just the student reads it and no, that's for me. It's not the generic Oh, his, you know, assignments coming up and his way to go for help. I'm not criticizing that by any means, because you know, I've been involved in developing those sorts of messages, because, you know, believe me, they're a lot better than nothing. But how much better is it if it's actually targeted, so that within that team, they know the students, it's going out to the right message is going to the right group of students. And I'm not saying any of this is easy. And I'm not saying that every university suddenly needs to do a

massive restructure. But there are other ways you know, of approaching it. So for instance, some universities now have got student advisors attached to particular schools are working within the schools, alongside the academics, at team meetings, at school meetings, and so on. And I think that helps a lot. I know when I worked for many years in students support at the University of Newcastle, I was on a, on a smallish campus, a Central Coast campus, and it made it possible for staff in our area to quite often go along to school meetings, and so on. And, and that, you know, just that communication helped a lot. But we were a small campus, so it made it more possible, whereas on on large campuses, large universities, they have to be, they can't operate that way just on people thinking proactively, it has to be embedded in systems and processes and structures. So I think that's a huge challenge for universities in terms of how to build a level of collaboration and coordination. So that, you know, the faculty isn't sending out messages about this, and centrally sending out messages about that and library sending out messages about other things, because that's when students, many students just turn off.

Tanya R 16:43

Yeah, and I think coming back to your earlier point about processes and policies, often the paper that is setting those and designing those aren't actually facing the students. So they don't actually know.

Cathy Stone 16:56

Yes, again, and they're certainly not facing all the students. I mean, for instance, you know, my background is very much in student support, and we would see a lot of students Yeah, but we were not seeing, you know, or by any means, as many students as, as the teaching staff see. And for most students, this, their strongest link in a way is with their, with the teaching staff, they're the ones they see, and or encounter online, whether they're face to face or online. So they're their connection point. And, you know, often think it's really hard on the teaching staff, because if they're, if they're dedicated, motivated, which I know so many of them on, they spend an enormous amount of time contact time with students, because the student goes to goes to them for everything. And so to support the teaching staff as well, is where we need that more coordinated collaborative approach. So that the teaching staff have some backup, so that they're not having to deal with everything, but the student is going to go to them because that's the one they know. So, you know, we, in student support, we used to try and get a lot of messaging into, you know, lectures and so on about support services, but it's not the same as having it really embedded in a curriculum, or having, as I say, people working alongside each other so that you can just say in the staff room, look, I've got this student who's coming to me every five minutes for this, what can we you know, how can we how can we help? How can we work together to, to help and I often think that simply sessional staff and that came out a lot in the research, I did the equity fellowship research with the National Center, a lot of stats staff who teach online, particularly our sessional staff, and you know, that they're, they're just they really often on their own. And and I think that's really hard. And so, you know, they're the ones supporting the students. And they need the support themselves from from, from a more solid and supportive base home base back in a more coordinated approach from the university, if that makes sense. Yeah.

Tanya R 19:07

I know that. In the past, if you use back you were the Director of Student Success at Open Universities, Australia. Yeah. So knowing that more of our non traditional student cohorts are accessing their higher

education experience online, what sort of strategies and different approaches to student support programs do we need to consider for those online learners?

Cathy Stone 19:31

Well, look, online learners need everything I've already said.

Tanya R 19:36

Obviously,

Cathy Stone 19:37

that's a bit more and and, and for the online learners, that you know, that connection with their online tutor is just huge. So, you know, you teachers, people who teach online will say repeatedly, that it takes more of their time to teach online and face to face. Because there I mean, it makes sense we all know it's slower to do something by text than it is to talk face to face. And because of the nature of online learning or the nature of the online learning cohort, a lot of synchronous learning is not going to be great for many of the students. So, like you and I talking synchronously now, it's very easy. But if I were, you know, an online student, I'd be at work now I wouldn't be able to be having an online tutorial like this. And so for a lot of students, the the nature of the contact is, is obviously a lot harder. Many, many prefer it, and it can be done extremely well. But I think the thing that the extra thing that's needed with online and certainly this came out of the research that that I did through the National Center, is that very, it's the relationship with with the teacher or the tutor, and that's where that person needs to have that backup. But also the learning materials, they need to be relevant, meaningful. A lot of students use the word authentic, they they are very quick. And because their time poor, they're very quick to feel aggrieved or disengaged, if they feel they're just being given what they describe as just busy work, just work to keep them busy, without it being really relevant, authentic, meaningful to their particular area of study. So it's got to be quite streamlined. And, and the design needs to be designed for online, I've met some fantastic learning designers and edtech people in the research that I did, and I continue to meet them at conferences and so on and talks that I do, and I have so much respect and admiration for them. And when they work closely together with the teaching staff, the results can be just fantastic. Because they can really build into the design. Not Not Not a not a lack of need for the tutor, but they can build into the design a way in which the tutor does not have to be sort of like, you know, 24, seven present. So it's it's working together, again, that collaboration to create an online course, that is specifically created for online so that it's engaging, it's it breaks up the content, it keeps students at their computer, because let's face it to sit at a laptop, I mean, I couldn't do it sit at a laptop and watch a lecture for an hour, an hour and a half, you know, I'd be asleep, I think. So it's got to be done differently. So, and there's a lot of really good stuff happening like that. Now, when I was at Open Universities, Australia, the, I guess that the quality varies so much. And this was, you know, I'd hear this from the students that students would say, I love that course, you know, because it was so interesting. And the tutor was so fantastic. And we had all these great little videos and all these little exercises afterwards that made it relevant. Whereas, you know, they'd say, but on the other hand, this other subject is terrible, because the lecture just puts up reams of notes. So, you know, it's, it's, I think, one of the problems is that quite a lot of universities through necessity, I guess, are teaching online and offline, online and face to face students, students at the same time. So the quickest and easiest way for them is to just record their lectures and put them online or to end or to invite students to attend the lecture

synchronously, but neither of those is an ideal solution, because attending a lecture synchronously is, is very, very, very disengaging, really, especially if it's long, if it's a short lecture, you know, 15, 20 minutes, fine, but longer than that, it's very hard. And to, and then to just but to, and then to watch it asynchronously, even worse, and even a whole set of PowerPoint slides. It's it's not it's not engaging. So it's, it's got to be active, it's got to be communicative. And again, the learning design can link students up more effectively with other students and and so I guess I come back to the importance of, of the teacher presence, which is vital in the online and the online design of the actual course. And also the the the ongoing contact with the institution because the interesting thing about Open Universities Australia was that, obviously, we were not they were not studying with Open Universities Australia, they were enrolled Through Open Universities, Australia, but studying at all different universities. So their link with our UAE was through the communication, the support that we would send out. And we did a we did a lot of really interesting stuff there. I mean, we did phone call outs to all new students within the first three weeks of their study period, we had student coaches who could, who we could, who could be, you know, students could be referred to if they were struggling. And we had also, and I think this is something I wanted to mention, as well, online modules to complement OR supplement their learning. And again, these are probably better when they're embedded in the curriculum, when it's like, if you want to know more about this, click on this, we couldn't do that at your way, because we were not the teaching institution, that we had free online preparation modules, the University of Newcastle has also a really good academic survival skills. It's like a MOOC, which is great. So I think those sorts of things are really helpful too. But again, ideally, they're embedded in some way into the actual content that the students go on to for their real classes. Because as I say, these are time poor students, many of them will just do what they see as essential, because they really feel they haven't got time for any more. But if they, if they're encouraged through through the curriculum to click onto something else that's going to help them and it's got to be relevant, this is going to help you with your assessment, and they find it really enjoyable and interesting, then they're likely to do more of that as well. But it comes back to starting with that learning content. And I guess just the other thing I'd say is about the tutors. there's a there's a really interesting paper written by Scott on look it up now just got to make sure I get this right. But it's where are we? It's by Andrea Dodo. Ballew do do ba Liu hyphenated. And she wrote this great paper called students thrive and teachers wither. And it's about it's about the online experience. It's about, here we go. It says students flourish and tutors wither. That's it. And it's in the Australian universities review 2017. And it's really about how these very dedicated online tutors are really helping students to flourish. But they are withering themselves because they're not getting the support or the recognition from their own institutions. And I have seen that so much myself in talking to teaching staff, particularly his test sessional teaching staff. So that's, I think that's a key thing for institutions to address because they've got to support the staff who were actually the ones that the students are relying on. And of course, in terms of the broader support services, they've got to be available accessible by you know, remotely, whether that's phone online, both both preferably live chat and phone, certainly, and and that applies to all the specialists counseling, mental health services, I mean, that's originally my background, and Library Services Act, the further academic skills preparation, that's, that's extra to what hopefully would be embedded in the curriculum. So it's, it's, it's about making sure that it's not, in the words of one student that I interviewed from research. It's not an office hours gig. It's the way the student described it. So you know, we've got away we've got to get away from thinking this is an office hours gig, it's not. And that has huge ramifications for everyone who's supporting students. So I think, yeah, I could rave on all day about this tenure

Tanya R 29:09

is a breeze. You know, that dovetails really nicely into my last question, which was, you know, basically stuff and also for those of our listeners out there that are involved in actually designing these policies, and these, you know, schedules and things, how do we adapt our predominantly nine to five mindset so that we can support these students? Because as you say, they're not nine to five. When they're working, they're studying in those other times, how do we make sure we support them with the support services, not just the academics?

Cathy Stone 29:44

Yeah, yeah. And look, I mean, that is happening in some universities really well, where they've got, you know, after hours, phone counseling services, and so on and live chat services. So I think it does require a major to rethink and, you know, the default model is always the face to face on campus, daytime students. And we have to get past that. So we have to always be saying, what about the other students? What about the distance students? What about the online students? What about the student who's doing their work at 11 o'clock at night? When the kids are in bed? What do we have for them? And if the answer is, well, we don't have much, then that's not going to work. Whereas if we do have something really fit for all those students, then everyone's needs, again, to be met. And I'm not saying that you have to have, you know, counselors and academic skill starting staff and disability staff on duty 24, seven, but maybe ours can be staggered. And maybe as, as I say, some universities are sort of outsourcing a, an after hours counseling service that they then have close liaison with. But we we need to be thinking differently, I mean, this, we have the technology to do it. So it's not that difficult. And there's a lot of people, a lot of staff whose lives are not nine to five, either. So there's a lot of staff who have, you know, young kids as well. So some staff may be really happy to work evenings at home. I know when my kids were young, and I was a university counselor, I would have been more than happy. I mean, we didn't have the technology then. But I would have been more than happy to work, say, seven to 10, you know, each evening, four evenings a week or something like that. I think that that there are we just need to be to get a bit more creative about this. So that we're, you know, because at the moment, it, it seems to be there's a lot of people working very, very long hours. So you've got someone who works a normal daytime shift, trying to fit in a call to students late at night as well. And so they're getting a double load, whereas, you know, let's rethink this, let's say, Okay, what hours are we trying to cover? What staff we have? How are we going to cover these hours? Do we need more staff? I think in terms of the student numbers, if you've got about the right balance of staff to students, and you may not it's really just about getting that that timeframe. Right. But I'm not suggesting it's easy, but it's more about just constantly asking that question. Have we got all our student base coverage? That's always goes back to that first point of knowing who your students?

32:38

Yeah,

Tanya R 32:39

no, that's been really great. They're all the questions I have. Is there anything that you'd like to share? While we have you here? cap, you've got a new research that you're working on at the moment? Anything?

Cathy Stone 32:50

Oh, well, yeah. I'm sort of always working on something. Lately, I've been doing a lot more work with them, looking at students transition to high school from Regional High Schools. So I did some work with the New South Wales department education that was through the National Center for Student Equity in higher education. And now about to begin work on a project with South Australian regional and remote high schools looking at the barriers to their transition to university, which makes it it's made a nice change for me, because I focus for so many years on primarily mature age students and then online students. And and I mean, the issues for Regional students are, you know, they're similar but different. But again, it's about understanding that that cohort, so you know, that that's, that's been, that's been a very nice change. For me, I guess I want to emphasize with the online for people to to know that these, the report that I did for the National Center, on the equity fellowship, on improving outcomes in online learning. That's quite thanks to the 151 people I interviewed across the 16 institutions. It's quite a rich report, full of the wisdom of these experienced staff who are passionate about online students and and helping them succeed. So I'd recommend that report to people if they're looking on the National Center website.

Tanya R 34:27

I'll also add the link to the podcast.

Cathy Stone 34:31

Great, thank you. And because there's very clear recommendations from that, on ways to improve student outcomes in online learning, and I know that they've been picked up by a number of institutions who are in the planning of changes to their online delivery or building their online delivery, which is which is great. And, and as I say, some of them might sound a bit idealistic, but it's something to aim towards. So I guess I'd want to focus on those And, yeah, my colleague Sarah O'Shea and I have just had a paper published in the Australian Journal of education technology on gender equity in online, which was nice for me to get back to some of the sort of gender equity stuff that I talked about in in my original doctoral thesis. So, yeah, so they're the sorts of things I'm doing at the moment. And yeah, really enjoying it. And it's been great to have the opportunity to talk to you today, Tanya, and thank you for asking me.

Tanya R 35:29

It's been lovely having you here. Cathy. I've really enjoyed the chat. And it's given me all sorts of ideas as well for the things that I can do too. So hopefully, it's been useful for everyone. So thank you for coming.

Cathy Stone 35:43

That's my pleasure. Thanks very much. Okay.