

RIDE 2025

Thursday 13th and Friday 14th March 2025

Keynotes

DAY 1 - AM

Distance Learning Sanctuary Scholarships: Lessons from Leicester

Dr Helen Dexter, Associate Professor of International Politics at the
University of Leicester

Abstract

In 2018 the School of History, Politics and International Relations at the University of Leicester established a fee waiver scholarship for their DL programme available to anyone, anywhere in the world, who had experienced barriers to education due to forced displacement or political persecution. Since then, Leicester's DL sanctuary provision has been growing. In 2022 Leicester launched the Ukraine Conflict DL Sanctuary Awards. These awards extended Leicester's fee waivers to people whose education had been disrupted by the war in Ukraine, crucially offering opportunities to non-Ukraine nationals whose education had been disrupted but who had been missed by other responses. In December 2023, our DL sanctuary offering expanded again with Leicester formally announcing 100 DL Sanctuary Awards as a formal pledge to the UNHCR 15by30 campaign.

In this keynote session Helen Dexter will discuss the lessons learned by the University of Leicester since they established these scholarships. Whilst there are many international organisations who provide emergency education specifically designed for students in crisis or vulnerable situations, Leicester offered places on relatively small, 'mainstream' DL programmes. It has been a sharp learning curve. Leicester's experience has made clear the value and the limits that mainstream university DL programmes can contribute to refugee and crisis education. Helen will discuss the practical, pedagogical, political, and ethical challenges Leicester has faced whilst attempting to widen participation to some of the most excluded and vulnerable students.

Prompts

Colleagues will be given the opportunity to reflect on Helen's input with these discussion questions.

- What are the most likely barriers students who are displaced, excluded due to persecution, or in crisis situations will face in accessing distance learning?
- What could your DL programme do to reduce those barriers? – Extra challenge, how can you reduce those barriers without using additional resources?



Helen is chair of the University of Leicester Sanctuary Steering Group and was Director of Distance Learning for the School of History, Politics, and International Relations at Leicester from 2011 to 2021. Helen is Senior Fellow of the Higher Education Academy and was awarded a Distinguished Teaching Fellowship for her work in widening participation through distance learning. Helen's research is situated within the field of feminist peace. Her ongoing research focuses on exploring feminist and pacifist approaches to the study of everyday practices of peace in cities and local communities.

DAY 1 - PM

TNE and International Higher Education; Past, Present and Future

Professor Mary Stiasny, Professor Emerita University of London

Abstract

The story of TNE is a long one, starting with travelling scholars in medieval times, moving through the internationalisation of higher education globally, to Transnational Education (TNE) as we now know it. The current expansion of TNE globally and simultaneously into flexible models of study and frameworks of qualifications will enable students to find the study mode they need and support them to pursue their education in ways that suit them and their lives, taking them into employability or further graduate level study. The challenges of affordability, capacity building, and equality of access are key areas for discussion, while universities strive to meet the

requirements of regulators to maintain quality and rigour of provision in transit. Various models of TNE find solutions to these challenges in different ways, and cultural and contextual differences shape the solutions accordingly.

The conference contribution will take us through the journey from travellers to TNE, from past to the present and into the future, at all times putting the student at the forefront of the story, while exploring the challenges which we must meet if TNE is to give the student what they want and need.

Prompts:

Colleagues will be given the opportunity to follow up on those key challenges with these discussion questions.

- Can providers maintain affordability for our students, and whose responsibility is this?
- Does the provision of TNE still contribute to capacity building where this is needed or does it cut across genuine partnership working?
- At a time of rapidly expanding TNE how can we continue to meet the concerns of regulatory bodies for quality and rigour?

As a lifelong leader, advocate, role model and mentor, Mary Stiasny has held range of roles across the Higher Education sector, both with a UK and international focus.

Mary began her career as a secondary school teacher, before taking up a role working for Schools of Education, where she trained secondary school teachers at universities across the UK. She went on to hold a number of senior leadership positions across the HE sector, taking senior roles in Faculties of Education at Goldsmiths College, Oxford Brookes University and the University of Greenwich where she became increasingly involved in the leadership of the Internationalisation of Higher Education. She moved to the British Council as Director of Education for some years, and then returned to higher education as Pro-Director with responsibility for Learning, Teaching and International at UCL's Institute of Education. Her last role has been as PVC International, Learning and Teaching at the University of London, overseeing the provision of Higher education by distance and through TNE systems to around 40,000 students per annum in 190 countries around the world.



Her work in Higher Education has ensured Mary has been able to lead on her twin passions for developing international education and as an advocate for women in leadership roles within the sector.

DAY 2 - AM

Building engagement and belonging in online international communities: Implementing and evaluating an online Student Ambassador Programme

Joanne Harris, Associate Director: Student Life at University of London
Isobel Edwards, Senior Manager: Student Engagement and Communications
Kyle Jussab, Student Ambassador for the University of London
Noor UI Huda, Law Student

Abstract

This talk will use the University of London Student Life Team's Student Ambassador Programme as a case study to explore ways of fostering a sense of belonging and community engagement among a global student population.

The digitisation of education has created unparalleled opportunities for students across the globe to access a high-quality education via distance learning. We are now seeing the wider digitisation of the student experience, with platforms rising to meet the needs of a highly distributed global community.

We believe that a lack of physical campus should not be a barrier to student community, however building a solely online community is not without its challenges. Research by Ali and Smith (2015) found that online students report higher levels of perceived loneliness than their peers studying on face-to-face programmes. This was reflected in the University's 2023/24 Student Experience Survey, where just 49% of students agreed with the statements 'I have had the right opportunities to connect with other students' and 'I feel part of a learning community'.

On a practical level, technological barriers and digital competencies can impact students' ability to engage with their community in a meaningful way (Stolba et al., 2024). Students' interactions are influenced and sometimes limited by the digital platforms at their disposal (Blayone et al., 2017) and significant input is required from community leaders 'to shape the virtual community's culture and norms' (Blanchard and Markus, 2004).

The University of London Student Life Team's Student Ambassador Programme builds an online community by leveraging widely available platforms such as Discord and social media to create a community that is by students, for students. This online community brings together students in a range of different contexts, including those studying at local teaching centres and those studying wholly online. In this discussion, we will cover the evolution of the programme and consider the unique challenges and opportunities of developing at scale without a physical campus, including the governance and pastoral considerations required to safeguard the community. We will explore the evaluation and impact of the programme on Student Ambassadors, the wider student body

and the institution and how a student-centred culture can be embedded in an online learning environment. Two Student Ambassadors will share their experience of the programme.

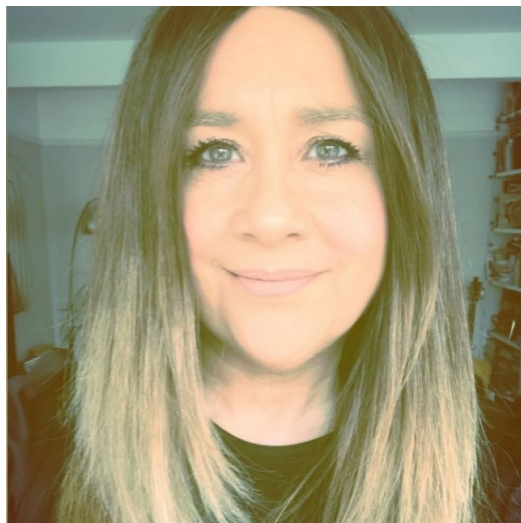
Key takeaways:

We aim for attendees to:

- Learn more about the unique challenges and opportunities of online community building.
- Develop concrete ideas for how to establish or develop an online ambassador programme in your own context and measure its success.
- Understand the practicalities of co-creating content, events and even platforms with stakeholders and to get inspired to develop your own programme output.

Questions for discussion:

- What is the role of the institution in fostering community engagement and to what extent can students be empowered to build their own community and what factors influence their needs?
- How can online platforms be used to create a sense of place for distance learners in the absence of a physical meeting place and how can the impact and success be measured?



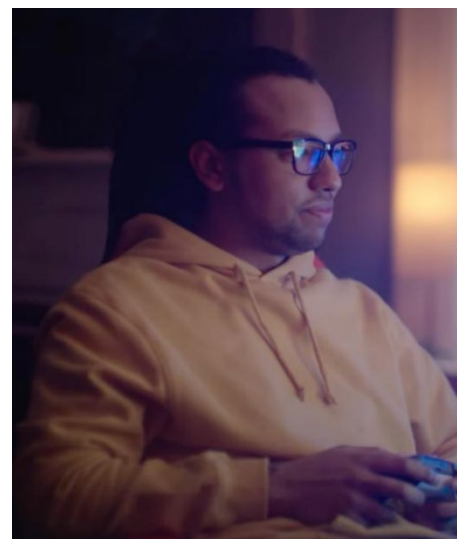
Joanne Harris is the Associate Director of Student Life for the University of London Worldwide. She oversees teams focused on fostering student success through learning enhancement, mental health and wellbeing support, communications, and engagement. Committed to empowering students, she emphasises her team's mission to provide a range of resources and initiatives that support students throughout their studies to achieve their full potential.

Jo is co-author of a chapter on Retention and Success: approaches and tools for making a difference. [Online and Distance Education for a Connected World published 2023](#) by UCL press.



Isobel Edwards is Senior Manager: Student Engagement and Communications at the University of London. She is responsible for the development of campaigns and initiatives that build engagement and a sense of belonging across an international community of learners. Isobel is passionate about supporting students from diverse backgrounds to succeed in higher education and has developed campaigns working closely with mature students, distance learners and students from non-traditional backgrounds.

Kyle Jussab is a passionate game programmer and Student Ambassador for the University of London. His journey into game development began at age 14, inspired by the making of the video game 'The Last of Us'. Kyle is pursuing a BSc in Computer Science at the University of London and an Associate of Science in Game Design and Development in the United States. He has gained valuable experience through the Snap Engineering Academy apprenticeship programme and contributes to the University community as a student blogger, ambassador, and member of the Student Voice Group. Kyle's dedication has earned him features in university podcasts and a Coursera commercial, showcasing his inspiring journey in tech and game development.



I'm Noor Ul Huda, a 21-year-old law student in my final year, based in Karachi, Pakistan. I'm passionate about corporate governance and litigation, with a particular interest in criminal law. Researching, reading, and writing are some of my favorite activities, and I have a keen eye for all things glam. As a student ambassador for the University of London, I love connecting with people from around the world, offering guidance, and helping prospective students navigate their educational journey. My role allows me to engage with new experiences, and I thrive on building meaningful connections.

DAY 2 - PM

This house believes closed book examinations are a relic that should be consigned to history in higher education

Ishan Kolhatkar, Global Client Evangelist at Inspera and education
technology leader.

Abstract

The history of exams as an assessment instrument dates back to ancient civilizations, where they were established as a formal means of evaluating knowledge and competence. One of the earliest recorded examples comes from ancient China, where the 'Keju' or imperial civil service examinations, were introduced during the Han Dynasty in 206 BC. These tests assessed candidates' understanding of Confucian classics to select government officials. Similarly, forms of examination were present in ancient Greece and Rome, where they were used to evaluate learning and skills.

Trite as it may be to say, 2231 years later, the world is very different. Students have a wealth of information at their fingertips. The rationale therefore in asking students to memorise information either to recall it, or to memorise it in order to apply it in closed book conditions seems harder and harder to justify.

For all the University assessment policies calling out the need to diversify assessment diets, closed book examinations remain an instrument. The justification for them varies: a need to prevent academic misconduct or "We've always done it this way" being two of the most popular. This does not diminish the hard work undertaken by countless academics to adapt and modernise assessment. The discourse in academia is undoubtedly in favour of reducing the number of exams that students have to take. As the number of closed book exams reduces, the variety of assessment instruments increases.

Higher education is about fostering critical thinking, engaging with the scholarly material and producing graduates who can contribute to society. Memorising what is otherwise readily available outside of an examination hall is contrary to those aims. It doesn't replicate the conditions people find themselves in as they go about their daily lives. The availability of information is not the same as the ability to critically engage with it.

In this keynote I'll explore the wide variety of alternatives to closed book exams in higher education and seek to persuade you that we can consign them to history.

During the discussion segment, you can test my premise and perhaps seek to persuade me that I'm wrong.

Question for discussion:

- Is there a place for closed book examinations in Higher Education?
- If so, what are the circumstances in which they are (a) the only option (b) a better option than other assessment instruments



Ishan Kolhatkar is a Global Client Evangelist at Inspera and an education technology leader. With over a decade of experience in the intersection of technology and education, Ishan is committed to driving positive change and inspiring the adoption of modern assessment methodologies worldwide. Before joining Inspera, Ishan was a legal academic following a career as a Barrister. He was Deputy Dean of Learning and Teaching and Director of EdTech which led to him purchasing and implementing Inspera. He has a deep understanding of how pedagogy needs to be enabled by technology through experience before and while at Inspera.

He was on the Department for Education T-Level panel for Law.

Ishan is an internationally recognised industry expert in education, digital assessment, digital transformation, digital enablement and change management. As an author, he writes for national and international education publications such as Times Higher Education. He has been a speaker at numerous leading education conferences, including Assessment in Higher Education and Association for Learning Technology, THE Campus Live and THE Digital Universities in the UK, MENA, Asia and ANZ, and the EDUtech Asia and ANZ.

Away from work, he's a keen amateur chef, posting pictures of his food online.