INTRO – Hi everyone, welcome to the ADCET Podcast – supporting you – supporting students. We would like to acknowledge the aboriginal and Torres Strait islander peoples who are the traditional custodians of the lands on which this recording is taking place and pay our respects to the elder’s past, present and emerging. In this podcast, taken from our latest webinar our host Debbie Hindle chats with a student panel consisting of student mentors from across Australia. As always make sure you check out our show notes for relevant links and to find the link for the webinar video. Enjoy.

DARLENE MCLENNAN - Thank you for joining us today.  My name is Darlene McLennan and I'm the Manager of the Australian Disability Clearinghouse on Education and Training, ADCET for short.

Today, we have Debbie Hindle, who is a coordinator of the University of Tasmania’s specialist peer mentoring program, SPEERMENT.  For those who know Debbie, you know she loves acronyms.  I was excited when she named the program SPEERMENT.  Deb is going to facilitate a student panel for us today from the student mentors from across Australia.  The panel aims to discuss and explore the personal potential professional benefits of being a mentor.  So, really looking forward to this.

Before I hand over to Debbie to introduce the panel, we just want to do a few housekeeping details, for those who haven't joined us before.  The webinar is being live captioned by Bradley Reporting and will be recorded.  This recording will be available on ADCET in the coming days.  To activate the closed captioning, you click on the CC button in your toolbar which is either at the top or bottom of your screen.  We also have captions available via a browser and we will now put that link into the chat for people to click on.  If you have any technical difficulties, please email us at admin@ADCET.edu.au.  The panel will discuss around 50 or so minutes - I forgot to check that with Deb, but hopefully that's it.  And at the end, we will have the time to ask questions.  We do encourage people to chat throughout the presentation in the chat pod and encourage you all to choose “all panelists and all attendees”.  That means we can all see the chat and see where you're from and some of your experiences.  But if you want to have a question asked at the end of the panel, can you please put that question in the Q&A box, or the Q&A pod, it's called.  That makes it easier for us to find the questions that we need to ask the panel at the end.

Alright.  I think that's it.  Hopefully, I forgot nothing.  Thank you for joining us and over to you, Deb.

DEBBIE HINDLE - Thank you, Darlene, and welcome, everyone.  It's a privilege to be here today, and to have Holly, Ellie and Namita join us.  Since I have been coordinating SPEERMENT, and I do love an acronym, especially when your program is called a specialist peer mentoring program for students on the autism spectrum, but since I've been coordinating this peer mentoring program, what has really kind of stood out for me is the amazing growth and development and benefits for the mentors.  Not only doing great work in making a positive difference for the mentees, but it seems there are strong spin-offs for the mentors for those students putting their hands up and working in the programs.  It's a great opportunity today to share some of those benefits, the mentors will too — will share some of those benefits for you.  But given that we've just been through such an unprecedented period in history with COVID‑19, it's also a good opportunity to share with everyone some of the insights that our mentors have found when working with their mentees in this time, some of the impacts of COVID-19 on students on the autism spectrum and what we can learn from that to take with us into the future.  So, I'm going to hand over to the mentors now and I will get them to introduce themselves because I know they will do it with such finesse.  We will start with Namita.

- Hi, everyone.  I'm Namita.  I'm studying at Curtin University in Perth.  I'm currently undertaking my Honours dissertation in a Bachelor of Psychology.  I have been a mentor for about one and a half years.  And I've mentored approximately 10 students in the span of one and a half years.  Yeah.  Over to you, Holly.

- Hi, everyone.  So, my name is Holly.  I am currently studying at the University of Tasmania in Launceston, Tasmania.  I'm currently studying my PhD in Psychology.  I have been a mentor in the SPEERMENT program for just over two and a half years now.  During that time, I have assisted five students on the spectrum.

- Thanks, Holly.  Ellie?

- My name is Ellie, or Eleanor.  I just finished my Bachelor of Medical Science at the Australian National University in Canberra.  I've actually only been a mentor for one semester now and only mentored one student, but it's been such a great experience and I'm really happy to be on this panel.

- Great.  And you have this kind of intensity of experience which will be a great addition.

- Yeah, especially during COVID.

- Thank you all, again, for your generosity and your courage in joining us this afternoon, too.  So, for those who may not be really across what a mentor does and how a mentor program that supports students on the autism spectrum works, perhaps, Holly, you could start off by explaining to our listeners what you do, what your role entails.

- Yeah, definitely.  So, within the SPEERMENT program, there is a range of different supports I provide to students which really hinges on the kind of support they need.  It can be anything from basic university support, which could include how to navigate the university website and access course material, how to participate in online discussions and email certain professionals, it could be study-specific, looking at organisation skills or assignment work and understanding marking rubrics.  There's also an aspect of peer support, like creating a safe space where these students feel they can come and have a listening ear and talk about struggles they might be having, either socially or study-specific, and being a sounding board for these students when they are experiencing issues so you have the opportunity to have a back and forth with them to try and come up with potential solutions for what they might be struggling with.

- Thanks, Holly.  Great comprehensive overview there.  Ellie, can you add anything to what your role entailed as a mentor?

- Yes.  So, I mentored through my university's participation assistant program.  And it's much the same as what Holly just described.  So, we're providing individualised support to students with autism throughout their first semester at the university.  A lot of it is making sure they know the services available to them and helping contact them so in the future, once they don't have an assistant anymore, they can still get help if they need it.  There is also things like helping them get out of their comfort zone, go to society events and make friendships and connections at university.  And providing directions to how they can further their passions going to university.

- I’d imagine getting out of your comfort zone and going to society meet‑ups can be scary for anyone.

- Yeah.

- But for people who aren't really confident in social skills, it would be even more difficult, yeah.

- Sometimes you definitely need like, you know, a bit of support and a bit of a push.

- Yeah.  Yeah.  Thank you.  Namita, anything you want to add?

- Yeah.  So, very similar to what Holly and Eleanor described, I also help my mentees overcome any barriers or challenges they face, such as helping them obtain a professional role related to their degree or just helping them get into the professional aspect of their working field.  So, I do that by encouraging them to practice interviews.  So, I would do like a practice run with them and make sure that they know what they're getting into.  And I also help my mentees increase social skills as part of the Curtin specialist mentoring program.  We host a social group which also helps them get out of their comfort zone and I encourage them to introduce themselves to a new member of the social group every time they attend so they can increase their confidence and their communication skills.

- Thank you.  Just needed to remember to turn myself off mute.  So, it sounds like there's a bit of a theme of helping students get out of their comfort zone and providing that safety to do that.  I know, Holly, you first started saying that safe space and Eleanor, you referred to it, too, about getting students out of their comfort zone, getting along to society and other things and Namita, you did that as well with social skills.  Yeah.  So, getting out of the comfort zone, feeling safe enough to do that, and, you know, sometimes I think that a lot of us would have friends and support to do that.  But perhaps people on the autism spectrum are less likely to draw on those other friendship groups and support groups within their lives to do that.  You have to excuse my dog.  She was told to be really quiet and to sit down, but she has decided not to.  So, we will see.  I am going to ask the next question and then I might have to open the door for her.  Eleanor, I'm going to ask you, tell me how you think that being a mentor has benefitted you as a person?  And if so, can you give me some examples.

- Yeah.  I really loved being a mentor for the one semester I was doing it.  I already had a bit of experience in this sort of area through volunteering at the local hospital which involved working with some people with disabilities.  This made me realise I really enjoy this area of work.  And it guided me to looking to doing a potential career in disability support maybe through studying occupational therapy or being a full‑time disability support carer.

- Yeah.  Thank you.  So, it's kind of reinforced with you what you want to do.

- Yeah, it's given me some direction in life.

- Good.  Good.  Good.  Namita, how has it benefited you as a person?

- So, this has greatly benefited me as a person because being a mentor has made me more sensitive in the way that I present myself to students as most of the students have been through a hard journey, their inability to fit into the norms of society.  This has made me more cautious as to how I present my body language and my vocal language while keeping in mind their experiences and conditions.  This has also benefitted me in how I communicate in the real world by being mindful of my language and when meeting someone that I don't know.

- Yeah.  Thank you.  And, you know, developing that mindfulness about our communication and what we say and how we say it and our body language can take years.  So, it might be that this was really accelerated quite quickly for you and I've seen that happen.  It's quite a great acceleration of communication styles.  Great.  Holly?

- Yeah.  So, being a mentor has certainly benefited me as a person - I would argue, making me a much more tolerant and understanding individual by working with such a dynamic group of individuals, it has certainly shown me the importance of patience and understanding, that some individuals don't see the world as black and white as I do, being able to empathise with these students has allowed me to appreciate some things that I may have previously taken for granted, such as, for example, university and how everything might seem straightforward to us, but when you put it in front of someone on the spectrum, it might not be as straightforward.  So, it's certainly shown me that the world isn't as logical as I once thought it was.

- Yeah.  Nice.  And how do you think it has benefited you in your career?  Namita, do you want to kind of share how being a mentor has given you either skills or qualities or another way of thinking that will be really beneficial for you in your future career pathway?

- Yeah.  So, being a mentor has definitely benefited my career pathway as my aspiration is to open a not‑for‑profit organisation where I can advocate further awareness and take action for neurodiverse individuals in third world countries where there is increased risk of stigma and marginalisation for individuals with mental conditions in society.  And the society is less tolerant of neurodiverse individuals.  So, being a mentor has provided me with the networks, the resources and hands‑on experience that I really needed to make this dream happen.  I can also use my leadership skills that I've acquired as a mentor to ensure that I can guide and direct future mentors to provide support for neurodiverse individuals on the spectrum in third world countries.

- That's awesome.  Actually, you're taking your experience from Curtin University and really taking it out in the world in a really proactive way to band the experience of people on neurodiversity, especially in third world countries. Would you have had that kind of aspiration before you became a mentor?

- I had similar aspirations, but not quite that directed.  So, being a mentor has focused the aspirations on knowing exactly what I want to do before I knew that I wanted to help people in third world countries and help people with mental conditions, but now it's redirected my focus and provided me with the tools that I need to achieve that dream.

- Awesome.  Thank you.  Made it very specific.  Holly, what about you with your career aspirations, as you're kind of part way through a PhD, you're getting closer.

- Closer and closer every day.  So, yeah, I would definitely say that mentoring has helped me in my career aspirations.  Eventually, I'm hoping to end up doing some clinical work as a registered psychologist, as well as some academic and potential teaching in the future.  Being in the mentoring program has definitely benefited all of these career paths, especially by being able to empathise with clients and students and develop a trusting and safe relationship is arguably one of the most important aspects in all of these roles.  As well as recognising that not all students or clients will have the same needs.  Both of these awarenesses and skills have certainly been developed in the role, especially being able to relate it at individual level with these students as opposed to just interacting with them based on their diagnosis.

- Yeah.  So, it's kind of getting beyond a diagnosis and knowing the person and interacting with the person.

- Definitely.

- Yeah.  Which sounds like it would be really beneficial both in academic research and teaching as well as in clinical psychology.

- Yeah, definitely.

- Yeah.  Thank you.  Eleanor, you touched on, before, your work in the hospital and your aspirations in the medicine field.  Any way that you think that being a mentor has helped you and benefited you in those aspirations?

- Yeah.  I think it's given me quite a lot of skills that would be helpful in those careers.  Being able to think more flexibly to make solutions that help these students adjust better to university and life and… yeah, and like I said before, it's really given me a direction as to what I might want to do now that I've finished my degree because I think I really would like to continue in this aspect — in this part of work.  Also, I just wanted to say, Namita and Holly, your aspirations sound amazing.  I would love to hear how you go with that.

- We need a follow‑up in about three years' time to see how it goes.  I wanted to share, coincidentally ‑ and this is one of the joys as coordinating a program such as this - one of my mentors from last year sent me an email this morning; she's applying for a Rhodes scholarship and asked me to be a character referee.  Like you, Ellie, she said being a mentor has given her so much direction and has been one of the most impactful things she has ever done.  So, she knows that she's really wanting to follow a career in looking at child development.

- Yeah.  It sounds cliche, but it's an incredibly rewarding experience.

- But I think you three are giving great examples to back that up.  So, we're going to bust beyond the cliches.  So, tell me then about — I'm interested about the COVID impact.  So, first, tell me about how it might have impacted on the way that you worked as a mentor and your role as a mentor and how you supported your mentee.  And I think, Holly, we'll start with you.

- Yeah.  So, COVID has certainly impacted that mentoring role.  The largest impact I would argue is having to move our sessions online and not being able to meet face‑to‑face on campus anymore.  And not being able to physically work through tasks with students has been a significant change, not being able to share a table with a mentee and collaboratively screen through their course work and requirements and assignments is a significant impact.  While there are some facilitators for this on the computer, it's just not quite the same as being able to grab out a pen and go through things with them.  It is really losing that face‑to‑face connection with mentees that has been the biggest impact on mentoring since COVID‑19.

- Okay.  Thank you.  What about you, Namita?  What did you find the biggest impact?

- Similar to Holly, I did find, you know, the biggest challenge was meeting online, but I found that my mentees also, due to COVID, their procrastination levels increased drastically working from home.  Students with autism, or students in general, often tend to associate the environment of university with the studying environment, and that environment of home with the relaxing environment and, you know, playing games and things like that.  So, I found that I had to frequently check up on them and make sure that they were keeping on top of their assignments and they experienced more added pressure with meeting the deadlines while working from home.  So, I had to ensure that I was keeping on top of that, I had to increase my organisational skills to make sure that my mentees were also meeting the deadlines or even talking to their unit coordinator to ensure the deadlines could be pushed back so they could … certain times.

- Does that mean there were a few extra little checks that you needed to do with your mentees and things you need to be aware of?  And I know Curtin runs a successful social group that you mentioned in the beginning.  So, what impact did the physical distancing have on that social group?  Did it still meet?  Did they manage to meet via Zoom or was it put on hold?

- Yes.  So, we were actually very happy to announce that a lot of mentees of the social group really enjoyed being part of that program because it allowed them to engage with other people and increase their confidence and communication skills.  So, when that stopped, they felt very disappointed that they had to experience yet another change in their life.  So, along with a few mentee coordinators and mentor coordinators along with myself, we were able to arrange an online social group via Discord so they could keep that routine going.  We were very successful implementing that.  We were really happy to keep that going after everything that happened with COVID.  So, that was amazing.

- Fantastic.  Awesome.  And maybe ‑ someone may ask you more about that because it does sound interesting.  Ellie, now, for you, you started mentoring as COVID hit. You got to see the student you were supporting a little bit before?

- Yeah.  We had about a month of meetings before everything started shutting down.  And, yeah, like everyone else has said, there was definitely an issue with getting used to having meetings online.  I think they did prefer having the meeting over Zoom instead of going face‑to‑face because I think it was more comfortable for them, but there was definitely issues like getting used to screen sharing instead of looking over each other’s shoulders as to what they were doing, and getting used to forwarding emails to each other instead of just showing them what's on my computer.  But, yeah, I think one of the major issues that we had was since there were no in‑person tutorials and practically no social events running, it definitely made it more difficult for me to sort of help them make friendships and connections at the university and made it more difficult for me to get them used to social aspects of classes.  I know my mentee was having issues with tutorials and getting ideas across in tutorials and since they moved online, the whole dynamic of tutorials changed.  Definitely, a little bit concerned about how it's going to go when they return to normal tutorials, but, yeah, I would like to keep an eye on that and see how that goes.  But I'm finished university now so… yeah.

- Pass that on to someone else.  And that actually leads nicely into the next question about how do you think that COVID‑19 has impacted on students on the autism spectrum, their studies and their experiences as a student?  So, you started talking there about changing — Ellie, you started talking about that change from being a participant in a face‑to‑face tutorial to moving and becoming a participant in an online tutorial.  What challenges did that bring up for the student you were supporting?

- It was actually kind of like the opposite of it being a challenge because they found that over Zoom tutorials, people would be talking less, so it was easier to, you know, butt in and get your idea across.  Because in the face‑to‑face tutorials, people just, like, you know, talk at each other for ages and it's not very easy to get a word in.  Over Zoom, people were a little bit more awkward.  So, it is a lot easier just to get your idea in.  But then, you know, the other side of that is that when things do return to normal tutorials, they might not have the experience of getting used to the normal tutorial dynamic and they will have to get used to a whole new style of tutorial when it is in person again.  Yeah, there's also — the student I was mentoring was in their first semester of university.  That's a critical time for making a difference, making new connections.  And the majority of social events had kind of stopped altogether.  It definitely wasn't easy to help them make any connections.

- Okay.  So, that might be hard to pick up, too, like how do you make those connections.

- Yeah.  I think picking up from everything being closed down is definitely going to be an issue.

- Yeah, that return back to campus.  I liked that about how the tutorial participation’s became easier because a lot of people become … how to communicate, then it was a bit easier …

- Also, like, doing a tutorial from their bedroom or living room, they're within their comfort space there.  They're somewhere familiar, it's not a new classroom or anything.

- Good.  Okay, Holly, what have you observed that you could add to what Ellie has said or perhaps totally different points?

- Yeah.  So, just picking up on something that Ellie said, it was really interesting how you said tutorials became easier for your mentee.  I actually had the opposite effect happen for one of my mentees.  The class they were in, everyone wanted to talk and they didn't really know how to interrupt in that kind of a setting.  It's interesting to see different dynamics and how that plays out.  But what I would say has been the biggest impact for the mentees that I've worked with is having to move everything online from having to relearn how to attend lectures and participate in tutorials, like Ellie said, and having to self‑motivate from home, that need to establish a routine for them was challenging at first, especially for one of my mentees who would use coming to campus as a tool to remove that distraction and stay focussed on their work.  Additionally, for mentees not being able to speak to those who support them face‑to‑face, either being myself or other professionals or academics has been something quite challenging.  I know, with one of my mentees, if they had a question for their lecturer, it was really daunting emailing them, but they hang around after lectures and ask questions.  But having to go from being able to do that to build up the courage to ask something in a tutorial or to email their lecturer was quite a challenge for them.

- Thanks, Holly.  And I liked that point about ‑ and I think Namita also raised it at the beginning of this chat - that being on campus equalled being a uni student.  Being at home did not equal being a uni student.  So, making that adjustment and changing that binary definition was quite challenging.  Namita, is there anything more you want to add about that and anything else that you observed about studying from home for the students on autism spectrum?

- Similar to Eleanor and Holly, I think they pretty much covered all of it, but just additionally with my mentees they generally tend to, like Holly said, hang back in classes and ask them questions and things.  But this hasn't been just a drastic change for the mentees, but a drastic change for the teachers and lecturers as well, they've had a hard time navigating the online, Zoom tutorials, or, you know, trying to find a way to get the students to hang back in a separate chat or something.  My mentee’s tutors had a hard time with technical difficulties, dealing with all of that, this kind of raised their anxiety and kind of encouraged them to drop back some of their units as well.  But, yeah, other than that, it's been a very challenging time for all of my mentees, especially doing it all online instead of face‑to‑face.

- Did all your mentees manage to make it through first semester and they enrolled in second semester?

- They are all enrolled in second semester and they did manage to get through the first one, but one of my mentees is, again, having trouble with the online classes because even though in WA we don't have as many cases and the restrictions are easing, on most of the tutorials for my mentee is still being held online, even though they're encouraged to do it in person now and because of the lack of international students and the lack of funds to university, the universities had to cut tutors' funds as well.  So, there's a lack of tutors involved in my mentee's unit and there's lack of classes as a result.  So, that's kind of caused the anxiety for the unit coordinator as well.  So, right now, we're debating on just taking a gap semester because it is too difficult.

- Yeah, that's a pity.  I suppose it does raise that issue that many of us experience in the sector.  It's a time of great uncertainty and disruption for all of us, and often, you know, when you're working in the sector you're trying to juggle that as well as supporting students, and if you're supporting students who are finding that disruption even more — you know, raises more anxiety, that compounds it as well.

So, given what you've all observed about the impact of COVID‑19 on the students that you're supporting on their study and their student experience, is there any advice that you would give to academics or other staff in tertiary education about supporting students on the autism spectrum?  This could be during times of COVID and beyond.  Holly, we might start with you.

- Yeah, so, I would say during COVID and beyond, in a more broader sense, I would say the biggest thing as a tertiary educator you could do is be flexible with these students.  The most important thing that you could do is just connect with them and let them know that you are available to chat if they have any concerns, even if that can't be in person like at the current point in time.  As well as also being aware that online study is something that these students do really struggle to adapt to sometimes.  But what they struggle with is often different between each individual student.  So, it is more about communicating with these students as individuals as opposed to trying to apply blanket fixes across how you deliver content.  While sometimes students don't know how to fix what they're struggling with, they often have quite good insight in what isn't working for them.  So, just encouraging them to raise any concerns they may have is a fantastic first step in assisting these students.  There are some specific examples of things to be aware of and I know that we raised tutorial participation before, but it is something that these students might struggle with a little bit because I know, at UTAS, the attendance in tutorials has gone from being like 15 to 20 people in a classroom, being up to 50.  It's quite a daunting thing for them to speak in front of such a large audience.  Or, something else that some students have been struggling with is content or coming out all at once in these online units.  I meet with some of my students and they freak out because enough content for three weeks has been released and they think they have to get it done by the end of that week.  So, maybe staggering content release is another thing that could help.

- Okay.  Thank you.  Ellie?

- Yeah.  Much like Holly said, like, you know, just being very flexible, keeping in touch with your students who have disabilities like autism.  Also, like, reading up a bit more about the different disabilities that are common amongst students, whether that's autism or even things like anxiety or depression.  Just reading up a bit more so they can have a bit more understanding about what their students might need.  Also, I would say, you know, if you're going to have a chat to one of your students about how you can make the course more accessible to them, maybe give them a few options, like whether they would like to talk over Zoom or prefer email or things like that because different people feel comfortable with different things.

Also, coming out of COVID now, some classes are returning to in‑person.  If they can stick with recording lectures, because some lecturers are getting a bit stricter on attendance now that things are going back in person, but sometimes with disabilities, like, not even just autism, it can mean that sometimes you can't attend class or sometimes you can't focus in class.  And I think it's just a good idea in principle to keep up with uploading the recordings of lectures so people can watch back if they need to.

And, yeah, another thing that's more in general instead of just with COVID is uploading lecture slides before lectures, I find, can be useful for students with disabilities going into lectures.  Because that gives you, you know, if you can have a read over the lecture slides first, you can have some idea of what the structure of the lecture is going to be.  And, you know, that can affect a range of disabilities.  For example, I've got attention deficit disorder.  Knowing the structure of the lecture can really help if I do lose focus.  With my experience with my mentee, I found that they really liked having the lecture slides ready so they could understand the lecture before they go into the lecture.

- Yeah.  Great point.  That's a really good point.  And I think also both you and Holly so far have reiterated that point of it's just checking in with that individual student and what works for them, and I like how you said solutions, Holly mentioned that often students won't know what's not working, but they're not sure of what might work.  So, if you have some suggestions and solutions to offer as options, that could really be helpful by the sounds of it.  Yeah.

Namita, what advice and suggestions would you give to tertiary education staff about supporting students, either, you know, as continuing through COVID or post‑COVID as some of us are heading that way?

- As many students on the spectrum are isolated due to social anxiety, they do not have the robust network to seek help like most students do or even ask the teacher when they're struggling with something.  This may lead to the student falling back behind in class or missing out on something important.  I would suggest actively approaching the student when they're in class or encouraging them to stay back or even making appointments to avoid drawing attention to them so the student doesn't get embarrassed either, to ensure that they have understood everything that has been taught and if they would like any further clarification on anything or checking up on their assignment progress, especially during COVID when a lot of students have been falling behind.  So, they can do this by providing very clear instructions or clarifications, and being asked as succinct as possible and removing any ambiguity related to the instructions and providing as much in depth detail as possible because a lot of students struggle with the ambiguity related to assignments and even the smallest details can help them go a lot further than otherwise.  For example, like, when they're in group assignments, there's a lot of ambiguity around what is required of them or what is expected of them being part of the group.  So, something that tertiary education staff can do is by either assigning specific roles or tasks to each student in the group that the student on the spectrum is involved with so the student has clear idea what is expected of them and they know exactly what to do.  And alternatively, if that is not possible to do, you can either assign students that are familiar to the student on the spectrum to the group that they're involved with just so they feel more at ease about the group assignment and they can ease up on any clarifications and provide them with the people that they're familiar with.

- Sorry, I just needed to cough then.  Namita, you raise some great points and we know that a lot of students on the autism spectrum struggle with group assignments and that often, you know, a group assignment task is set and then students are just left with it, but there's a whole lot of skills that takes to be part of a group and organise as part of a group.  It sounds like you've seen students really struggle with that and I've seen students really struggle with that as well.  I love your suggestions about allocating certain roles and giving some really clear and specific kind of suggestions and non‑ambiguous or unambiguous expectations and texts for that.  And ambiguity is something else that you raise ‑ what an interesting word - and also, you know, we think that what we write is really clear, but then, you know, you read it through eyes that don't see such clear or don't make assumptions, and it really… you know, it's like, "Yes, of course I'm confused with that."  And it's really interesting that often our mentees will bring something to their mentors and say, "I don't get this, I don't know what they want."  And our mentors will read it and go, "I don't get it either.  I can understand why you're confused."  So, it's a really good check.  I think we need someone, sometimes, to run things past and do a check.  I know if we get things more clear, less ambiguous for our students on the spectrum, it is going to actually make sense and clarify things for everyone.

So, some great points there.  Now, we've got — probably got 15 minutes.  I know we've got six questions in our Q&A that I haven't looked at.  Darlene, are you still there?  Is there anything that you want to start us off in?

- Thanks, Deb.  I will give you a chance to read through them.  One of the most popular questions was:  what type of online platforms did you find beneficial to maintain mentee/mentor communication sessions and accountability?  Does anybody want to go first for that one?

- So, that could either be the online platform that you used yourself in your role as a mentor or any that you observed that academics were using.  I assume that would answer the question.  Who wants to go first?

- I found Zoom was very helpful because Zoom was really reliable, especially since they extended the 40 minute limit and they made that unlimited minutes of contact.  That was really helpful.  I also found Discord as well if you wanted to play games or have that social time with mentees.  And Discord was helpful in playing different games like Jack Box or the drawing games that I can't remember the name of.  But they were really cool.  That was really nice.

- What was it again?  Say it again, sorry.

- It was Discord and Zoom.

- Discord.  I heard the Zoom one, I hadn't heard of the other one.  Any other…

- Would you share the screen in Zoom? Did you use the share screen functions?

- We used Discord to share the screens.  I couldn't figure out how to do it on Zoom.

- Big learning curve with Zoom.  Ellie and Holly, you both mentioned that one of the difficult things was not being able to sit side-by-side with your mentees and look over their plan or their, you know, their unit outline.  So, did you use Zoom or any other platform?

- Yeah.  It took some time getting used to, but we did find Zoom was quite flexible because once we did figure out the share screening, that meant that we could look at each other's computers from our own rooms.  But, yeah, it definitely took a bit to get used to.  Before that, we were just forwarding emails to each other with the documents in it.  But it's definitely easier if you can just see each other's screens using the share screen.

- Cool.

- I also found that Zoom is good because it sends them an email before the meeting so that they remember that the meeting is on.  Yeah.

- Nice.  I didn't know that.  So, that's handy.

- Yeah.

- Yeah.  Holly?

- Yeah.  So, we use Zoom as well and the share screen function is really good.  Particularly, one of my mentees has a lot of anxiety about missing key instructions that get posted on, like, the university website.  So, being able to share the screen and go through that together was really good.  And they also had a bit — there's quite a lot of formatting requirements in first year psychology assignments.  So, being able for us to both, like, for me to have a look at their assignment on my screen and show them how to change the formatting and then to follow along on their own computer was really beneficial as well.

- Good.  I know Zoom became our lifesaver a bit, didn't it?  Did you notice any platforms that academic staff were using with your mentees?  No?  That's okay.  That's fine.

- So, Deb, one of the other questions is more of a question for you.  Are you aware of any mentoring programs for students on the spectrum within the TAFE system?

- I know that there are a few TAFE systems — few TAFEs who are keen to set one up and I know that, sometimes, have tried a mentoring programs, probably a little bit different of a model to what Curtin, UTAS and you were using.  You know, the local one here just didn't continue.  We've actually ‑ and if people who are listening aren't aware - we actually run a community of practice for universities and TAFEs around autism mentoring programs and you're welcome to join that if you want to find out more about it.  There's a few TAFEs who are members of that, but they haven't quite yet got the right kind of model that would work in the TAFE.  And part of that, I think ‑ and from my perspective ‑ is that, generally, students at uni are just there for a little bit longer.  So, you can capture a student in their second or third year.  So, for example, Holly, this is your fifth year, I think, at uni or fifth full‑time equivalent year.  So, you've gone through undergraduate, gone through honours and now doing a PhD.  So, we've actually had Holly for three years, we're very lucky.  And Namita, the same might be for you.  Do you think you've been… it gives you a year to settle in and then you might become a mentor and still have a few years to do that, whereas TAFE courses tend not to be so long.

- No.  It's more challenging, isn't it, in that way.  Somebody has asked a question for all of us being motivated with work, but also being motivated with our study: what things did you do or helped you to continue to be self‑motivated, and also what strategies did you use to take responsibility of your time management?  So, often we talk about that for the mentees, but for the mentors, it probably would be a challenge.  Any tips, tricks?

- So, I'm definitely — I've definitely been working with that myself.  So, I have a lot of calendars that I use.  I've got my big wall calendar there where I put up all my assignment due dates and cross the days off as I go along.  I also had a system of setting reminders on my phone and using my diary.  I've got a paper diary where I write in when things are due.  I think having all those reminders definitely keeps me on track.  I definitely also recommend using a study timetable so that you… this is also something that I worked with with my mentee, setting up a study timetable so you don't spend all your time studying one subject.  So, you disperse your time around the different subjects.

- And a big part of your work was organising that study timetable with your mentee and checking that they were able to stay on track with it.

- Yeah, we did that a bit.

- Yeah.  And how successful was it for them?

- Yeah, I think it worked pretty well for them.  We were quite lucky because especially towards the exam period, all of the exams were worth about the same percentage each.  So, the mentee pretty much just divided the amount of hours he had evenly into three to spend like, you know, each of the three subjects.  I think they also liked having the timetable because they liked having a bit more structure and seeing things a bit more logically.

- Awesome.  Especially, during this time, I think.  Namita, what was your experience and how do you keep yourself motivated and how did you keep your mentee motivated and on track with studies?

- I kept my mentees motivated and the way I helped my mentees also motivated me as well.  So, I always checked on them and made sure they were on top of everything.  And while I checked on them, it provided them with a reminder as well to get things done and not to procrastinate and things like that.  When I checked on them, it would also kind of remind me, okay, if I'm providing them tips and tricks how to stay on top of things, I need to apply that as well to my life.  And I have to preach what I advise as well.  So, yeah, it's been a bit challenging to always — to remove all the distractions and to stay on top of studies, especially with doing honours right now.  All of my studies are online, like my meetings, my lectures and everything.  And just, I have to handle — I have no assignments, I have to handle all of my tasks by myself.  So, it's been a bit challenging to make that timeline by myself, but I've been trying to set deadlines for myself.  By week 1, I have to finish part 1 of my introduction or week 2, I have to finish part 2 of my introduction, that kind of thing.  So, that's how I've been keeping motivated.

- Nice.  So, you set yourself really tiny deadlines and had to go for them.  If I'm going to get my mentee to do it, I better do it as well.  I like that.  Holly, have you got anything to add?

- I would say both for myself and for my mentees is setting really clear goals each day and really breaking tasks down.  So, one of my mentees has quite a lot of reading to do, they've got four units and each unit might have between 10 and 15 pages, so that could be 60 pages of reading for them.  But really breaking it down and saying, "Okay, so, by the end of Monday, you're going to have done an hour's worth of reading.  Then we will evaluate on Tuesday how much more you need to get done on that day and trying to break tasks down as simply as possible."  And then, just like Namita said, doing that check‑in and making sure they are keeping up with the tasks that they have set for themselves.

- Thank you.

- On the line of breaking down the tasks into smaller tasks, I find that's also very useful when you have a lot on and it's feeling quite overwhelming.  If you write each of those tasks out into tiny subtasks, if you write them out and physically cross them out as you get them done, then you get the feeling of satisfaction of, "Yes, I'm getting through this work."  I find that makes things a little bit less overwhelming.

- And just that positive emotion when you go, "Yes, tick.  I've done another item."  We're talking a lot about that at the moment, how do we get that positive emotion, because that's what changes our behaviour and habits.  There's nothing better than crossing something off your to‑do list.

I am just looking… I think Petria has mentioned the University of Wollongong has an assignment calculator.  That's great.  I think we've been using one from New Zealand, one of the New Zealand universities has a really good one.  And I'm happy to share that.  And our resources, we've also done a really meticulous semester planner and weekly planner, haven't we, Holly, that kind of encourages people to break down tasks into small tasks and put timelines and deadlines on that and a bit like Namita, you set your own deadlines and timelines as a way of keeping yourself going.

- There's probably two more questions.  We're running out of time.  One of the important ones is: how do you handle mental health issues that may arise that may have already existed for the students?  Have any of the mentors got any experience in that and provide us the feedback?

- Thanks, Darlene.  Who would like to comment on that?

- I've got a bit of a comment.  So, definitely understanding the mental health system in Australia is good.  I guess, like, you know, fortunately, I already had experience with that, like, getting mental health care plans and knowing who the good psychologists are in the area and how to get on to a psychologist.  And just having a good understanding of that and helping direct your mentor — I mean, helping direct your mentee on to professional services if they do need it.  Like, my mentee already had a psychologist who they knew was good.  Luckily, they could go to them if they did need it which, fortunately, they didn't at the time.  I think it's important to understand those things and have an idea of who is potentially a good GP or psychologist to recommend.  Yeah.

- Good.  So, knowing those kind of — those recommendation points, referral points which is a better way, really, than anything you have to take that on yourself... Sorry?

- We've got to remember that, like, we're supporters, we're not doctors.  Like, we're not psychologists.

- Yeah.

- Holly might be soon, but…

- Yeah.  Not yet, but a really good point.  And Holly and Namita, have you got any comments on that point about stepping back and going, "This is beyond me, this is beyond the role."  And how do I do that well?  And how do I do that well with still keeping the trust of my mentee and feel like I'm supporting them?

- Just on the mental health notes, like, with the mental health, I find that if it's getting worse due to the COVID situation or because of the university, that's sort of my obligation is to help them or, you know, or find alternatives to help either anxiety, like, for example, particularly around the group assignment or the lecturer is not getting back, then I would step in and help them figure out alternatives such as contacting the uni coordinator or arranging a meeting with the tutors to make sure they're getting appropriate help.  If it's outside of the university or if their mental health is just getting worse even though we've tried to figure out the alternative, then I would suggest that they seek professional help or they seek the university’s psychology services or things like that, which is definitely beyond my help.

- Yeah.  Thanks, Namita.  It's kind of giving that practical advice, and when it goes too far, encourage them to seek professional help again.  Holly?

- Yeah.  So, very much was Ellie and Namita were saying, which is being aware of where your boundary is and, like, I had a mentee, for example, that was coming in with quite a lot of anxiety which was more to do with learning online as opposed to something deeper.  So, we could sort of manage that within our session of, okay, this is how you use the different tools that you've got.  But a second mentee that I've been working with had a lot more personal things happen.  And being able to recognise that and knowing that they already had support systems set up, so really encouraging them to go and see someone else.  And also just reminding them that in this current situation that we're in, it's completely normal to experience some sort of anxiety and low mood and that everyone is sort of a bit stressed and worried at the minute and that's completely normal and it's okay to have bad days and seek support and just put the computer down for a day.  That's fine, too.

- Yeah.  Nice.  Thanks.  That normalising is really important.  Darlene, that's all the time I think we have…

- I just want to ask this one because I think it's a really good question.  Sorry, if people have to leave.  It will be on the recording.  Have you received any roadblocks from academic or teaching staff when you've needed to contact them in relation — on behalf of the mentee or if you're doing that kind of negotiation and, you know, how have you overcome that if that's happened?

- Yeah.  I had a really specific example a couple of years ago when the program was sort of in its infancy and not a lot of academics knew about it.  I went with this particular student who may not — the lecturer may not have been aware that they were on the spectrum and they really needed to speak to them.  And I was there and I sort of got interrogated as to why I was there because they hadn't heard of the program before.  So, just, sort of, in that particular situation I sort of just said, “I’m just here to help this student.  If you would like any more clarification, this is my supervisor's email.  You're welcome to contact them."  But just sort of not trying to detach or take away attention from that student or embarrass them either.  It was pretty harsh, but that was probably the worst thing that's ever happened.  Nothing like that has ever happened before or after that.

- Yeah.

- So, generally, Holly, you find that the academics are really supportive once they know who you are, your role and do what they can to assist you assist the mentee?

- Yeah, definitely.  Especially, this particular mentee at the time didn't have their learning access plan organised.  So, that lecturer didn't sort of know that they were on the spectrum.  Other mentees already had their learning access plan there.  So, when I sort of came in and said I'm supporting this student, they already had a bit of background as to why, and they were very sort of open and welcoming, and if they have further questions, they might ask me them when the mentee goes, which is a really good way to handle it.

- Namita, what have you found?

- I think with me, specifically, I think I touched on it a little bit before with my mentee right now, the unit coordinator is also the tutor.  And he is the only tutor.  So, he told my mentee that he was only available to answer any questions during tutorials.  And the tutorials, there's only two of them per week and they're usually really packed.  The unit coordinator is also feeling very overwhelmed with the amount of work.  So, they've told the whole unit that they may not have time to check the emails or reply to any emails, it is better to ask them during the tutorial, so that provided my mentee with a lot of anxiety and, you know, having that only time to ask questions and if the tutor is too busy answering other people's questions, they're not going to have time for my mentee.  So, we didn't really resolve it.  We just ended up, you know, dropping out of the unit until the COVID situation eases a little bit.  And we decided that that's probably a good idea since it's even, you know, providing the unit coordinator with a lot of anxiety as well.  So, yeah, that was kind of how we overcame it.

- Alright.  It might be time to finish up.  Thanks, Deb, for allowing that last question.

- Okay.  My pleasure.  I will hand it over to you to finish up then.

- Alright.  Thank you…

- Before you do, I should just thank you ‑ thank Namita and Holly and Eleanor so, so much.  You have contributed some great insights and sharing your experience. So, thank you.

- Thank you for inviting us.

- Thank you for having me.

- Yes.  It's always so powerful.  We find hearing the student voices so powerful for the disability sector in the tertiary area.  So, thank you so much for giving your time.  I know there's been a lot of work in the back end before we got to here and I appreciate you've given your time so freely to share your knowledge and wisdom.  And also, thank you to Debbie for doing such a fabulous job facilitating.  And thank you, everybody, for their great questions.  It was fantastic to see some of those wonderful questions coming through.  And we're already getting some great feedback on the chat about how impactful it has been for people.  Have a good rest of your day, everybody, and thank you for joining us.

- Thanks.

- Thank you.

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