NCSEHE webinar: The WPO ‘Pivot’ — Shifting Widening Participation Outreach activities to a remote learning environment

Sarah O'Shea: Hi, everyone. We're just waiting for a few more people to log in. Hi, welcome. First, I'd like to start by making an acknowledgement of country. Today I'm located on Dharawal nation and I'd like to acknowledge with deep respect the traditional custodians of the land, the Wadi Wadi people, and pay my respects to the Elders past, present and emerging and to the Aboriginal people that continue to care for country. I stand for a future that profoundly respects and acknowledges Aboriginal perspectives, culture, language and history and a continued effort to fight for Aboriginal justice and rights paving the way for a strong future. Thank you for joining us today. My name is Sarah O'Shea, I'm the director of the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education, NCSEHE for short. NCSEHE is housed at Curtin University in WA funded by the Commonwealth Government, with a dedicated mission to improve the higher education outcomes, access, participation, retention, success and completion rates for marginalised and disadvantaged people through a variety of strategies including research, practice and policy. We are really excited today to have Kylie Austin and Meg Smith present. Kylie and Meg are both working in student equity and outreach with UOW, the University of Wollongong and had performed a rapid pivot for outreach work. We invited them to share learnings about this transformation and provide insights or lessons learnt. However, before we begin, just a few housekeeping details, this webinar is being live captioned by Bradley Reporting and will be recorded. The recording will be available on the NCSEHE website in the coming days. In fact, it's generally in the coming hours. To activate the closed captions, click the CC button in the tool bar that is located either on the top or the bottom of your screen. We also have captions available via browser. Nina will add that to the chat pod now. If you have any technological difficulties, please email ncsehe@curtin.edu.au. The discussion and presentation will run for 40 to 45 minutes and then we're going to have time at the end, about 10 minutes for questions. Throughout the presentation, please feel free to enter the chat pod and chat with us by choosing all panellists and attendees. But, if you have a question for the panel, please add that question to the Q&A box. You can also vote on the questions posted by others. We've received questions from participants already, so if we have time, I will ask these as well. Over to you, Kylie and Meg.

Kylie Austin: Thanks, so much Sarah and thank you everyone for having us today. It's fantastic to see some familiar faces in the audience. Today Meg and I are going to be sharing our experiences over the last two months in terms of shifting our widening participation and outreach practices into an online environment and we acknowledge this is happening right across the sector at the moment and so, I guess we're just really sharing the challenges, the highlights and some key insights into practice and onboarding your institution to these practices over the next hour, acknowledging that there's other fantastic work already happening across the sector at the moment, as well. Just to tell you a little bit about us, my name is Kylie. I've been working at the University of Wollongong in equity for the last 12 years and over that period I've designed, led, a range of equity programs. I'm also the president for the Equity Practitioners in Higher Education Australasia organisation as well. I have a strong focus on partnerships and collaboration and how people work together to achieve goals and so, you'll start to see some of these practices that really underpin our values at UOW coming out over the next hour. Meg, over to you to introduce yourself.

Megan Smith: Hi, everyone, thanks for joining us today. I'm Meg the Outreach Manager here at UOW. I've been working in higher education for around four years, all of that at the University of Wollongong and most of that time was really spent in marketing roles with the faculties at UOW. So, I've been the outreach manager for UOW since July last year and that just means I'm responsible for working with staff across all of our campuses to deliver outreach and programs to students from equity backgrounds. We work across the Illawarra, the NSW South Coast, the Southern Highlands and the Liverpool area, as well.

Kylie Austin: Great, thanks Meg. Just to get a start, I'm going to give you a bit of context about the region and the university that we're working in, because it's really influenced our practice here at the University of Wollongong. At UOW, we're still considered very much a regional university and a university that's very focussed on our local community. The footprint of UOW extends from south‑west Sydney, from a campus in Liverpool over to southern Sydney down to Wollongong and then 430 kilometres down the coast. We've got campuses in Southern Highlands, Shoalhaven, Bateman's Bay and Bega. That's really informed the footprint of outreach activities at the University of Wollongong over the last ten years. We are quite a unique university in terms of the population and the local region that we're drawing from. Within our local region, we've got one of the highest unemployment rates in regional Australia and our student population is quite unique. Most of our students, about 50% of our students are first in their family to go to university. Just over 19% of students are from low SES backgrounds and 29% moved to Wollongong from regional and remote areas to undertake their university studies, or attend one of our local regional campuses. Also, 2.2% of our students identify as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and that cohort of Aboriginal students is growing significantly at the University of Wollongong particularly over the last two years. At UOW we take a whole of student life cycle approach to student equity. We start working with students in year 6 and we have a whole range of programs, which Meg will talk to shortly, that work with students the whole way through their primary school and high school years. From there, we also have quite a strong transition program and we work with students in terms of their transition into university and ensuring that students are well supported to enable their progression throughout university and if they choose, to complete their degree. Our engagement with students extends to well after they finish with us, whether they partially complete their degrees or whether they go on and undertake careers. We do continue to engage with students for that 6 months to 2‑year period as they finish up their university degrees as well. We take very much a student life cycle approach across the journey and outreach is one component of the work that we do.

Megan Smith: At UOW our outreach program really spans students from early primary school through to their post‑Year 12 studies as Kylie was just talking about. We provide programs for students as young as Year 2. We get them coming onto the university campus, sitting in lecture theatres and using labs and facilities to get creative and solve problems and start that thought process about what they enjoy, where their passions lie and starting to dream big for their future. The second column, the high school years 7 to 10, those programs are really focussed on students to find their interest areas, to identify their strengths, to think about their careers in a broad context. Particularly outside their own lived experience, this university operates in an environment that has traditionally had very traditional kind of careers. So really starting to open up the possibilities for students outside of those traditional careers. We focus on delivering skills‑building content that helps set students up for future academic or work life. These might include exam study skills, time management modules, critical thinking activities and really starting to think about the world of work in the 21st century along with a range of information about post‑school choices. The programs tend to be practical and hands‑on and led by student mentors. We have a strong focus on the UN sustainable development goals. In the senior high school years, we focus on the pointy end which is the HSC and the post‑school options. These programs are about supporting students to make informed choices by giving them information about pathways, higher education applications, VET studies and gap years all as possibilities. We ramp up the options for academic support in these programs. For those who are choosing to come into higher education after their HSC, we make sure they're well prepared, but also that they have this really realistic expectation of what university might be like for them. Because it's such an individual journey for each person. Finally, we have our transition programs which are all about supporting students from an equity background once they've decided to come into higher education either through alternative entry programs, or activities to help them make a positive connection and learn how to ask for help. We've gone quickly over those programs. If you'd like to find out more there's information about those on our university website. In terms of the challenges with COVID, I'm sure many of you are faced with the same challenges when it hit back in March. In particular we found that we were operating in a totally new environment in which all spending was under review especially HEPPP. The university was looking to redeploy funds to help students continue with studies. They continued new scholarships, IT equipment such as laptops and Internet dongles and accommodation and catering support. So, we were really under pressure to respond quickly to demonstrate where outreach would fit across the institutional agenda in this new environment and what our value was to UOW, but most importantly, to the communities that we serve. The timing was such that we had a very small window of opportunity to adapt our programs entirely to suit on‑line delivery and this was three weeks prior to the school holidays. Schools were confused, communication lines were chaotic. We were obviously not particularly high priority for schools at that point in time who are really just trying to navigate the recommendations of State and Federal Government as well as the Department of Education. We had to tread carefully to let schools know we were there to support them and we wanted to consult with them, but also to make sure we weren't pushing that too hard. While all of this was happening, the team was faced with learning a whole bunch of new skills in the digital world. Not just technical stuff like using Zoom, sharing your screens, turning your computer audio on, but how to create engaging content through on‑line programs, how to record and edit videos, write scripts, set up multiple Google classrooms and make that accessible to students from 56 different schools. So, a really big challenge for the staff here. Finally, we had the challenge of the unknown. We didn't know how long this would last for. Would this be a quick response for a short period of time, or would this change our practice longer term? How would students react, what would the uptake be and would the schools engage with us?

Kylie Austin: One of the things that we really had to do at this point was pivot our widening participation and outreach programs whilst really staying true to the ethos of what we were trying to deliver in a face‑to‑face environment. What we did within quite a short period of time is put together a proposal in consultation with the schools, our local schools that we were working with up to our senior executive to really demonstrate how we were going to deliver remote learning opportunities for students in our local region in the current COVID environment, and what we did was we positioned what that would look like for each year group right across the year, and that was a really critical piece of work that we had to do in terms of maintaining institutional support for outreach. As Meg said, in a time that there were a lot of competing priorities and so, it was really looking at a lot of the work that had been commissioned at that point through the Department of Education. I know Sarah had done a piece for the Department of Education as well to really demonstrate how the COVID situation was impacting students in our primary and high schools, how it was going to impact their education and their post‑school aspirations beyond COVID and adjusting the programs to reflect the needs of the schools and students in our community. So, what we put forward to the senior executive was a revised remote delivery program model that could be delivered for the remainder of the year, but that really demonstrated to schools key learning outcomes in terms of their engagement with us so they could see the value of how their continued engagement with their students and the university would continue to add value to their curriculum and to the development of the students in their schools as well. This was the model that we put forward and it really identified a whole range of key programs from year 7 right up until access to higher education.

Meg Smith: So today we're going to use the university preparation program as a case study to talk you through. We've obviously had to pivot across our whole outreach program. So that includes the year 7 to 10 space and also Year 11, but in particular, the UPP was a huge program that we had to take on‑line. We're using that as a case study for today. I'll refer to it as the UPP throughout the presentation and it's been running for almost 10 years now. It's been hugely successful with the schools in our area. It's a program for current Year 12 students who think they might want to go onto uni or TAFE when they finish school, but they recognise they might need academic support in their HSC support. It runs in six of our campuses and usually we'd run the program for 20 weeks with an intake of 400 to 500 students. Across the 20‑week program students usually come to the local campus on a weekly basis for face‑to‑face sessions with student mentors and have to have an attendance rate of 80% to pass the program. Initially the program was designed to offer this in‑depth subject support and mentoring for Year 12 students to really help them maximise marks in subjects that they felt they weren't performing particularly strongly in, but increasingly over time the focus of the program has shifted to cover content into softer skills like referencing and plagiarism, things that are new to Year 12 students, but important when they head into university. Accommodation options particularly for regional campuses where students are thinking about moving away potentially when they finish school. And, this is really where the campus that is running the program have really contextualised the content based on the needs of their regional cohort. It meant last year in 2019 we ran the program quite differently in Bega, for example, when you compare it to the program that ran in Liverpool. This year, bearing in mind that we had quite a different molecular we had to really shift it and with a move into 100% on‑line environment we really had to make fundamental changes to the program structure for UPP to make it work. They're we're running a shortened program. We've reviewed the duration and we've changed it from 20 weeks down to 15 weeks. We've organised on‑line HSC subject support package. This is really helping to tutor students across two subjects where they feel they need help over a period of 13 weeks. We've taken it out of the responsibility of the mentors to do that subject tutoring and we're doing it in a different way through Inspire Ed. We've focussed heavily on cultivating essential post‑school skills. That really strong focus on employability trends, pathways information, resume writing, all the important things when you graduate from high school and the format is a 30‑minute lecture usually presented by UOW staff followed by an hour‑long mentor session where approximately 10‑20 students join a break‑out room facilitated by two mentors. They talk through the lecture content, finish up activities they've been set through the week and have a chance to have an informal chat with mentors to ask questions to find out more about university. In terms of the key benefits for the students, we had already made commitments to students as part of the admissions process before COVID hit. Some of those benefits haven't changed. We obviously need to honour those, so we'd already committed to offering students who complete the program an admissions interview or an offer through our early admissions program and offer assistance to students around the application process. It's not just about UOW, it's about navigating that system so that they're confident to apply for degrees that they want to do whenever they want to study. We also run a mock English exam as an optional extra. It's not an essential thing they need to do, but in school holidays they can log in and do an English exam either for advanced or standard English and the papers will be marked by HSC markers, so feedback is provided to the students a number of weeks before they actually sit their big serious HSC English exam and that means they can really use that feedback to try and improve the results of that exam. Kylie touched earlier on the fact that we have a really broad audience of students. That really comes from the broad I guess geographical locations of UOW and our campuses. They have a diverse set of needs. Sometimes it's location‑based and sometimes it's the fact we're out with 500 different students. To help address this we asked questions as part of the application process such as whether students had access to IT, computers or the Internet so that we know particularly in some of the regional areas this is a challenge for students and at the regional campuses where students had access to come onto campus if they were having some Internet issues just as a back‑up option. We also asked if they had specific learning needs they needed to take into consideration as part of the program. We tried to support our students throughout the enrolment process. We know the enrolment process can be confusing for students particularly Moodle so we reached out to students every step to walk them through the enrolment process and staff from the outreach team were amazing answering calls and emails 24‑7 to make sure this happened and they were busy with inquiries. We touched on the presence of mentors in the program. They're an essential part of the UPP. Creating that contact between the UPP students and the university and really understanding that first‑hand experience of the mentors is a really core part of the program. In terms of content we had large shifts in how we organised and presented it. Working through Zoom and Moodle has presented challenges, but what it actually meant was we could focus the content, make sure that we were offering 15 weeks of really fantastic youthful content we could co‑design and get feedback on. That was a great opportunity for us to make sure that content was really engaging for UPP students. We achieved the content by creating a predictable routine so they have regular time for sessions and worked through self‑paced modules in their own time. We track whether students are engaging as part of the program. They've got tasks to complete to meet the requirements of the program so we can reach out to those who aren't engaging to start that dialogue about what's going on and whether or not we can step in to assist them. We've built in weekly evaluation in the form of pulse checks. We'll talk through that further in a minute. We've heavily collaborated with lots of units across UOW. That's been really important to the success of the program. We heavily involve our faculties for degree information and academic content and also involve our student services division and that's really just to make sure that we're not doubling up on activity, that we're promoting each other's programs. Often we speak to the same careers advisers and the same contacts at high school so it's really important that we do work with our student services division to make sure that we're all on the same page and we also make sure that we link Indigenous students with the centre here at UOW.

Kylie Austin: I think they're all really good points, Meg and one of the things we felt when we were heading down this road two months ago is whilst we'd all had experience in designing educational programs for students before, I wouldn't say that any of us were experts in designing on‑line educational programs and so we really looked to see what guidelines and what frameworks were out there for practice in a remote on‑line learning environment and so, each of these points that Meg's just spoken through have been adapted from Cathy Stone's National Guidelines for Online Learning and one of the things that we did identify when we did look at those guidelines was the fact those guidelines were developed for a current student audience and so when Meg was working with the team we came up with other design considerations that were quite specific to the outreach and widening participation space that we really needed to factor into our programs.

Megan Smith: We realised that parents were feeling the pressure of their children learning in the new environment, so we've really developed specific parental engagement strategies to help support those parents and really them engage with kids as much as possible. We found there was a real appetite for parents to be looped into the conversation and as a result we created a series of EDMs, so electronic mailouts basically to the parents of our UPP students and they went out on a weekly basis and that was really just a recap of what their children were learning that week and had top tips on how to start conversations around that content with their kids over the weekend potentially. We also developed five Zoom workshops so we're inviting parents from across the region to take part in these Zoom workshops in term 2 and it's really just breaking down what the world of work in the 21st century looks like. It's really different for parents now to think about what their kids are going to be or challenges their kids are going to be facing in the future. The fact they're going to have multiple careers. Really just trying to demystify the process of university, applications and UAC and really starting to talk about realistic expectations around careers heading into the future. Taking that place‑based approach was really important to the program. Although previously we developed this baseline program that was delivered in a uniform way across the weeks, we've still done that, we've still got this baseline program that has real consistency across the campuses, but we've also realised that you can't just, one shoe doesn't fit all in terms of the students at our campuses. We've really given the campuses permission on certain weeks to open the discussion up and really tailor content to the students in their area. For example, in Bega we know there's a lot of talk around leaving home basically, so what are your options about studying away from home? What are your options if you choose to stay in the area or the community and study at this regional campus? Taking that flexible approach with the regional campuses. They've been impacted by bushfires particularly on the far South Coast, so we need flexibility in attendance, advice about financial options, gap year advice, all the really important stuff. We really had to maintain our commitment to the widening participation agenda in an increasingly pressurised environment. It could have been very easy for our programs to be viewed as a recruitment pipeline activity for the student services division. We had to be really clear about our objectives and push back sometimes on the institution around what we would and wouldn't do as part of the programs. Protecting the integrity of the content and protecting the integrity of the delivery was really important to us and ensuring we spoke about applications into higher education in a really broad sense was important so we've included VET and TAFE in everything we do, talking about UAC in a broad sense and supporting students if they want to put in applications to other higher education providers. That's part of what we do. Really building that connection to higher education is at the core of the program, so maintaining that in an on‑line environment was one of our key objectives. The simple experience of talking to a mentor week in, week out and them being able to describe their university experience and even their high school experience and transitioning from high school into university is really important. We really need 16- to 17‑year‑olds who are looking for role models they can relate to who have gone through the whole process, so that starts to break down that level of intimidation around asking questions and historically we've seen really strong relationships being built out of those mentoring relationships. This is a snapshot of the 2020 cohort for UPP. 574 Year 12 students is on a par with previous years when you compare campuses. Wollongong has continued to perform strongly. We've seen drop‑off in the South Coast campuses for obvious reasons around bushfires and some of the other challenges facing those communities at the moment. 63 high schools is actually an increase. We're up five schools compared to 2019, so that's fantastic news for us and some of these are from areas that just wouldn't have been able to engage with UPP previously, because it was such a physical on-campus experience. We've now got students from Tamworth and areas of the Central West taking part in the program who wouldn't have been able to participate previously so that's really exciting for us. The number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students this year is pretty consistent with previous years. We saw a small uplift of about 1% and again for first in family students it's pretty consistent. We had a small uplift of around 2.5% this year. All in, we've had an exceptional rate of uptake for the program this year. Students have demonstrated their desire for HSC support and that's really important there. They're proactively seeking help at this time. Using our new tech skills, because we're all so digitally advanced at the moment now, we've produced a couple of vox pop videos to give you an insight into how our mentors and students have reacted in the space. We probably don't have time to show them both. You can watch them in your own time, but we will show you one which is our student perspective video. (Music plays)

Student: I think the benefit of having UPP delivered through Zoom at the moment as compared to other years is even though we are lacking that in‑person contact we tend to collaborate a bit more, because we've got more access to resources and we feel more comfortable, because we are in an environment that we are aware of our surroundings and we feel comfortable. Whether it's in our room or our study and I feel like as well, there's no way of hiding in these Zoom calls. Like you need to interact to show you're present and to reap the rewards that are set out. I've enjoyed really bouncing off of each other and it's much better than I expected it to be in regards to the on‑line delivery. I was kind of expecting more so kind of what the larger Zoom sessions are made of. You guys kind of talk to us, we sit there and listen and absorb the information. But I feel like just having, like Katrina said, the interaction between everyone, that's been really good considering the circumstances and I feel like it's a lot more convenient in some aspects. Just like, not having to travel and what‑not, it's easier to complete everything through Zoom. The only con would be just the technology in the sense that there's so many variables and things that can possibly go wrong for the hundreds of people that participate in the program. It can't be perfect for everyone in that sense.

Music plays)

Student: UOW has made it easier with flexibility and leniency in the sense that I know personally I had technical difficulties this afternoon in trying to get on‑line and you guys made sure that I was still marked here and I had completed my work and just having other support services like the Facebook page and the ability to privately message mentors.

Student: UOW has always provided sufficient information, constant promotion. It's not something like you see it on a flyer and you forget about it. Oops, I forgot to apply for that. It's a constant reminder, because they want you to be engaged with the idea of higher education and understanding it's not as intimidating as it seems and I feel like through par taking in these programs in particular, my transition into university will probably be a lot smoother.

Student: The whole factor, it feels like there's been an effort to diversify the modes. Last week we got the week off which was not a Zoom call, we go through and watch videos and respond to that. It works better for people who might not respond as well to video and interaction as they might sort of a video learning process, which I thought was really nice.

Student: I give praise to the program and kudos to my mentors as well, because if they weren't as open and willing to share their experiences and share their knowledge and take on board what us as students have to say or are concerned about, then we wouldn't be able to have this interaction and to be corroborating on ideas.

(Music plays)

Student: I feel like even, I expected it from the physical gathering, but having the on‑line gatherings, I feel like we have kind of interacted a lot more with mentors and peers as well. I feel like just conversing on‑line, we've kind of established a little bit of a relationship in that sense, where we're getting along as well as we can given the circumstances. I didn't really expect that.

Student: I found for me personally I found Zoom calls are actually a very effective way of doing that, especially through being able to see everyone at once and in some ways, it actually enhances that conversation. I know it's nothing like physical conversation, but it has been quite good given the circumstances.

Student: All the information, like the abundance of knowledge every student is receiving at the moment by partaking in this course, that individual investigative nature of this program and the modules provided, it's been very helpful and I feel like it's a wealth of knowledge that's handed to us simply through the page.

Megan Smith: Awesome. It was really nice to hear some of that feedback from the students. What really shone through there for me was that ability to still connect with their peers and mentors even though we are in this really challenging on‑line environment and I think like I said, that was a core objective of the program to begin with, always has been. It's really nice to see that continue. YouTube is deciding to continue its play. While we're talking about feedback, the next slide that we're talking about is the evaluation of the program. What's been great about moving into this on‑line context is that we have been able to introduce these... I'm just going to let Kylie come out of that screen. We've been able to introduce these weekly check‑ins with students, because it's obviously really easy through on‑line to do that. These sort of pulse checks are small questions that we ask every week of our students. We ask them a series of three to four questions. It's really hard to deliver content through Zoom as some of you already know. You can't read the room and see body language and if students are taking notes. A lot of the time for us, we can't even see if the student is there, because they've turned off their sound and camera. We're working with students who have Internet problems, who have band width issues or maybe they have a messy bedroom that they don't want to show the world. Getting that instant reaction from students can be very difficult. We introduced these really quick pulse checks. They're embedded into weekly content and we try to use fun ways to measure it. We have smiley faces, thermometers and polls and it's a temperature gauge for us to see how the students are feeling about the program. What's really great about these checks is the ability to be super responsive really quickly. If we use the above graph as an example, students here were asked to rate their satisfaction with last week's content using an emoji face and it's great here to see that most of our students were pretty happy and the response was pretty positive. But if we saw in a particular week that this graph was the opposite, we'd be able to respond really quickly to find out what that issue is and this I think will end up probably changing our approach to evaluation in the long‑term and really changing our practice to this more interactive model rather than previously we've relied on pre‑surveys and post‑surveys and extrapolating from those. This just means we're able to improve things on the fly. Here are just a couple of responses from last week's survey and what's interesting is that much of the positive feedback from this year echoes previous years in terms of the student experience. Students are really enjoying the opportunity to connect with other students, to connect with their mentors, to find out more about university life, pathway options and that idea of self‑discovery. That really came through strongly I think in that student video as well. At its heart the UPP is about building confidence. It's great to see we've been able to maintain the integrity of that. In terms of negative feedback there are obvious challenges we're facing and it's clear to see that students are really craving that face‑to‑face nature of learning as well. Here are some more comments about what students are looking forward to learning about which is happily covered in our upcoming modules in UPP, so that's good. In terms of reflection for the program, we had a number of highlights and challenges that really came out of the program. Kylie and I are both going to speak to this slide. For me, what really came out strongly as a highlight for this program was the collaboration between the campuses. We had six different programs running fairly individually across different campuses at UOW and what we were able to do quickly was to get the program leads from all of those campuses together in a working group at the beginning of the program and really make sure we were re‑developing UPP in a format and structure that would work across all of the campuses for our students.

Kylie Austin: My video is not working Meg, but I'm still here. It's been really interesting I think, like you said, the student interaction. Obviously, they're still craving that face‑to‑face. The other aspect that has been a challenge has been trying to manage that shift to remote working and that shift out of that face‑to‑face work space for the team themselves. That was something we had to be conscious of, that while we were ensuring the program relevance and that the programs could continue in this remote learning environment, we also needed to provide professional development to the team and we also needed to provide professional development. We had to invest in our own professional development as well to upskill our digital skills, but we definitely saw an increase in workload on the team whilst they're learning those skills, shifting everything to a remote learning environment and having those kind of institutional and school‑based conversations.

Megan Smith: In terms of some of the other challenges that we faced when we kicked off the program, the communications with schools. We weren't able to collaborate with them as easily as we usually would, remind them that the program was open or let them know how student numbers were tracking. That was definitely challenging. That said, we had some amazing careers advisers working around the clock even when the school holidays were on. We were able to keep some of those channels open. And, the technical side, so Moodle I think can be a challenging platform for seasoned students let alone brand‑new students who are still in high school. Being able to navigate enrolment and Moodle was really a pretty big step for some of these Year 12 students. Not become able to be there and physically hold their hand through the process definitely presented a challenge for the team. I mentioned earlier the team are on call pretty much 24‑7 through the enrolment process and coming back to Kylie's earlier point of the workload and wellbeing, that impacted on staff heavily as well. And, Internet access, particularly in regional areas. The far south coast of NSW has had a rough trot for 2020 and those are find we have students who are in the most need for these programs, so making sure students had access to devices and Internet we knew would be a challenge for the program as well.

Kylie Austin: I guess what we want to leave you with at the end of the presentation today is a few tips from our perspectives and our learnings from designing widening participation and outreach activities for a remote learning environment and as well as onboarding and continuing to maintain the support of your institution as well. I think some of the things that we've taken away and obviously, speaking with our colleagues across the sector quite regularly at the moment in terms of what they're doing in terms of their widening participation practice we know some of these things are at the front of your minds, as well. It was really quite clear talking to the students to continue to build those really strong connections between the mentors and the students involved in the programs themselves. It was interesting, while the students were doing those video interviews, you didn't see all of that in the video, but they were having a joke around with each other, they were ribbing each other a little bit. They'd really developed that rapport even in that on‑line space and particularly because we're drawing, a lot of our mentors are drawn from local schools and local regions. That instant connection I think has been really important in that remote learning environment. The other thing, as Meg spoke to earlier, is ensuring that our programs continue to be contextualised to the students in our regions. We know that the students we're working with in Liverpool, for example, have very different needs and want different things to what the students need who are located at our Bega campus. One of the things that has been fantastic about the way that the team's approached this is we've been building these things into the program design, into the fundamental core program design, but we've also got different content happening in different regions to meet the needs of those students. We've been responsive to student needs by putting them at the front and centre. We've been really careful to ensure the program isn't rigid and through regular pulse checks we're adapting the program content to what the students are telling us they need over the 15 weeks of their engagement and I think the parental and teacher engagement has been really critical as well. It's been really interesting when we've been running Zoom sessions with parents, we asked them why they're actually coming along to these Zoom sessions and having a chat with us. The resounding response from parents really has been well, my child has committed to their learning, so I wanted to show them that I was committed to their learning as well. As Meg said, there's been a real appetite for parents in this really unknown, very confusing space which has been more convoluted by COVID and the bushfire situation, parents are also feeling they need a space to have these conversations and have that support as well and as Meg said, even though we recognise the pressure that it's put on the team they've done a fantastic job in terms of just providing that support to students. We really couldn't speak more highly of the team in terms of how they've delivered this program and how they've supported the students over the last eight weeks. It's shown a real commitment to putting students first. Some of the other things in terms of maintaining the support of the institution that we found are quite useful as well, has been really tying everything that we're doing back to the research and not just the research that has been done in WPO that we're all familiar with, but tying it back to research happening right now around COVID and schools and the disadvantage that remote learning is presenting to students from equity backgrounds in primary and high schools. Like I said earlier, the Department of Education commissioned a range of research that was presented a few weeks ago. So really being able to draw on quite rich recent research has been really important for us. As well as some research done by some community organisations such as the Smith Family as well. Some of the research that's been presented is that this current situation is impacting on students' motivation for learning and also, how they see their post‑school future. We really see our role as a university to work with TAFE, to work with VET, to work with the schools and it's a really collaborative partnership approach to how we support students in our region to be able to continue to persist in really quite a challenging environment at the moment. What we've also done is provided the senior executive with the argument. We've linked it to the institutional priorities, we've linked it with the senior executive. We've given them the argument to continue outreach. They didn't have to come up with it themselves, we provided the documentation that they need so they can continue to advocate for continuing this work in a highly pressurised environment and to be honest, we've been very lucky at UOW that we've got very strong support from our senior executive with the work that we do in this space. We've actively sought out collaboration with other areas of the university as well and so, we've really worked with other areas of the university to ensure we're doing this as a collaborative approach across the institution so we're not inundating schools with duplication of activity. We've been promoting the good news stories and the early wins, as well. We've been providing weekly reports on student engagement in the whole suite of our programs up to the senior executive, but we've also been really promoting some of the things that the students and teachers have done in the local communities, as well. That's been really important. They're just a few tips I guess from our experience and we know there's a lot of expertise in the room today and that you guys have your own experiences. More than happy to stop at this point and really take on any questions.

Sarah O'Shea: Thank you, Kylie and thank you, Meg. I'm sure everyone will agree that was just the most terrific presentation. We've had an enormous amount of interaction on chat and some really interesting questions that are still coming in. But I'm going to start by asking one of you, a lot of questions have come in about the mentors. These have ranged from approximately how many mentors you have, what kind of training do you do with the mentors and actually, one question which is around, how do you manage the communication between the mentors and the high school students?

Kylie Austin: Do you want to take that Meg, or do you want me to take that and I'll fill in the gaps?

Megan Smith: I'll answer it and perhaps you can fill in the gaps of the things I miss. We have mentors on the books for all of the campuses. Each campus will recruit their own student mentors. In total we probably have around 80 to 90 mentors across all campuses. They're obviously current students and we undertake an interview process with them before we make them an offer of becoming a mentor and then we undertake significant training with them across mandatory reporting, privacy, how to interact with students, what our programs are about and most of them come from equity backgrounds or from our inter uni partner schools. That's really important, because they have lived experience, they can share with the students we work with. There were so many questions within that ‑ that covers the training and the number that we have. In terms of the communication, how we communicate with our mentors, we have a Facebook group set up for the mentors and we're in pretty regular contact with them through that. We also have weekly wraps that we send on a Friday to our whole mentor force and that has upcoming opportunities, wraps up the week, lets them know what's coming up in terms of the UPP program and in terms of them communicating with the high school students. We're really strict about that. The opportunity for them to interact is really in that Zoom session and it starts and it ends there. We facilitate any other communication or questions outside of that through Moodle. There's a separate Facebook group that's set up for the UPP students of 2020, but we ask all of our mentors to set their social media settings to private so they can't be sought out by certain high school students. They don't friend them on social media. We're strict about making sure there are lines in the sand around what that relationship is.

Kylie Austin: All of those platforms are moderated as well. One of the key things is we actually enrol the students at the university so they have full access to our learning platform. They're all moderated by UOW staff and that's probably just another tip, as well. Because we pay our mentors. All of our mentors are from identified target equity backgrounds. That's been another kind of really key argument that we have fleshed out with our senior executive is that this is part of a retention strategy as well for our mentors and a financial support strategy that we can engage equity students in paid meaningful employment during a time where hospitality and other employment prospects have potentially dropped off for some of these students.

Sarah O'Shea: Really good point, particularly in the current financial climate. A couple of questions here around whether you're going to continue with this blended approach? Do you see this as something that's now embedded in your practice?

Megan Smith: Yes, I think we're open to pulling the whole UPP program apart and rebuilding it after COVID. There are definite benefits to face‑to‑face learning and teaching, but we've obviously seen some fantastic benefits taking the program on‑line. I think that blended approach to it is definitely something we'll be looking at in future. Particularly the fact that taking it on‑line really does allow us to open up opportunity for some students who hadn't previously had the chance to take part in the UPP. That's a really important part, a big learning for us and one of the really surprising highlights in terms of getting the program up on‑line this year.

Sarah O'Shea: Great, thank you. I'm going to try for two more questions before we finish up. A couple of people have written in and said, how many people are on your team?

Kylie Austin: Enough! It's actually quite interesting to be honest, because when I look across the sector our outreach team is actually quite small. Located in Wollongong and I think the other thing to keep in mind is we've given you a snapshot today of one program that we've run through COVID, but the team has been running multiple programs during this period. Located in Wollongong, we have about 6.5 full‑time staff dedicated to outreach, but like I said, we're running multiple programs and then we've got fractions of staff located at regional and metropolitan campuses who've worked with us to develop this. We're not a large team, but a very productive and a very committed team.

Sarah O'Shea: One last question. We've got someone who's asked, they often struggle with parents engaging in activities. Is there any advice you can provide to increase parental engagement on‑line? Maybe some of the steps you took to maximise this engagement?

Kylie Austin: This is a really interesting point, because we're collaborating at the moment with the University of Tasmania to undertake some research on this that's funded by the National Centre, so thank you Sarah. Some of the strategies that we've implemented have been, we've gotten students to write home to their parents to say, in some of the programs, to say why they would like their parents involved in the program. It's been a bit of a hearts and minds strategy that we've really used. Parental engagement over the last ten years has been a challenge for us as well, but I think what we've seen is that this environment we're in at the moment it's allowed us to deliver parental engagement in new ways. We're also seeing that parents are really wanting that support at the moment as well, so I don't think at the moment we've got a silver bullet, but certainly we'd be keen to share some of the NCSEHE-funded research of what comes out this year with the sector to really find out what we've learnt in that space. But they're probably some of the initial emerging learnings that we're seeing.

Sarah O'Shea: That's great. I'd like to thank you both again. It's been a terrific presentation. Very quick and yet with such great insights. I think a lot of people and certainly what's been indicated on the chat is people have got some real take‑home messages. To let everyone know that we are recording the session. We will put it up on the NCSEHE website and we'll also include some additional materials and we'll talk to you Meg and Kylie about those a little later on. If anyone has not yet registered for our e‑newsletter or is not familiar with the National Centre, can I encourage you to look at our site on‑line. Thank you to ADCET for their support in helping us bring you these webinars, as well. Thank you.

Kylie Austin: Great, thanks everyone. It was great to share our knowledge with you and feel free to reach out to us, as well. Meg and I are more than happy to talk to anyone. If anyone wants to collaborate or share any learnings, we're open to that, as well.

Megan Smith: Thanks Sarah and thanks everyone for watching.