Pathways to Inclusion
## Stories from the Ally Community

An Ally for Inclusive Practice
with Claire Gardener, University of Derby

University context: "Strategies for Success"

The University of Derby is a TEF Gold University in central England with over 17,000 students enrolled in 300+ programs of study. As part of our commitment to student success, we have made a focused effort to ensure that our teaching experiences are inclusive and equitable for all our students. Recognizing the diverse needs and circumstances of our students, Derby's inclusive learning initiative aims to provide more accessible, supportive environments for students to learn independently both inside and outside the classroom.
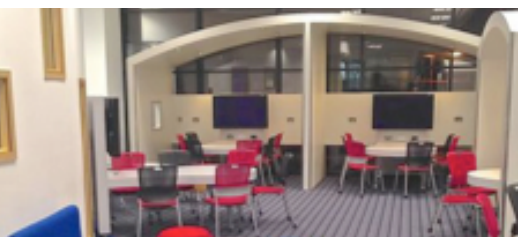
Learning space at Derby's "The Learning Curve"

Goals for Ally: Support Inclusive Learning

Based on the Technology Enhanced Learning (TEL) Strategy, Derby introduced the "Digital Practice Programme Baselines"* as a framework to benchmark practice and support enhancements to the student digital learning experience. The Baselines contain a self-review form completed annually by Programme Leaders/Teams to help track progress and implement strategies for improvement. The baselines also include a section on inclusivity, which asks lecturers to document a consistent approach to creating and reviewing their course content accessibility.

◀◀ We saw Ally as a tool that could support our inclusivity initiative

Resources

*Learn more about our "Digital Practice Programme Baselines" which received the Blackboard Catalyst Award for Teaching & Learning 2018:

- Derby's Learning and Teaching Strategy

- In the sector: Jisc NUS Benchmarking tool

- University of Derby Digital Practice Handbook

Using Ally's institutional report, we could more easily track our accessibility progress at the individual course and campus levels. For example, we were able to identify some positive trends over the past several years, as well as areas on campus where we were having success, such as our online programs that used course templates authored by instructional designers. We also saw Ally's instructor feedback as an intuitive way for our lecturers to become more aware about accessibility issues in their courses and to assist them in improving their content. To aid this effort, our Learning Technologists team worked through Ally's feedback to familiarise ourselves with Ally features in preparation for workshops and lecturer questions.

Implementation Strategy: Communications and Workshops

After testing in 10 modules, we moved to release Ally across the University, which took around two weeks to implement across our platform, including both

clear that they were not required to fix their content issues all at once.

Prior to Ally, our office hosted a "Using Technology for Inclusive Learning" workshop as part of the inclusivity initiative. With Ally, we introduced an Ally-specific workshop for lecturers, but

Screen shot from "Inclusive Practice" support page

> **Instead, we encouraged them to use the Ally feedback to think about small changes they could make to their content, and to contact support for issues they could not address on their own**

current and historic programmes and modules. Although we had some anxieties about the reactions of staff to the Ally indicators, we devised a clear messaging strategy to contextualise the purpose and goals of Ally for our lecturers. We provided them with a point of contact in the Technology Enhanced Learning office, and added Ally help guides to our Digital Practice Handbook to complement our existing materials on accessible course design.

In our email communications with lecturers, we emphasised that the Ally indicators were only visible to them, and that Ally was a tool to support their inclusive learning benchmarks. We set manageable expectations for lecturers in our communications by making

found the "Using Technology for Inclusive Learning" workshop was better attended, perhaps because it was more familiar and tied to the campus inclusivity initiative.

Evaluation and Findings: We improved!

The day of launch, we expected the phone to ring off the hook with questions, but we only received one call from a lecturer. Even though our messaging did not demand lecturers take any immediate steps to remediate their course content, we saw a 3% gain in our overall accessibility in just 2 months. The Ally launch has also catalyzed more conversation about inclusive learning design, demonstrated in the increased attendance for our "Using Technology for Inclusive Learning" workshop.

We see Ally helping raise awareness for lecturers about the value of accessible, alternative formats to student success. We are also finding that Ally is helping us more accurately benchmark our content accessibility progress and inform our accessibility strategy across the University. We are in the process of designing lecturer and student surveys for more detailed feedback about accessibility, their Ally usage, and our support structures. Our biggest challenge will be keeping the conversation going and scaling our efforts as we move to address more complex accessibility and inclusive learning issues in the virtual learning environment.

Pearls of Wisdom: Start with Awareness

We view inclusive education as a culture shift that starts by raising awareness about the barriers that prevent students from equitable, inclusive learning experiences. By situating Ally as part of a broader campus initiative around inclusive learning, we were able to better communicate to lecturers the purpose and expectations about how they used Ally. This helped ease their anxieties, spark conversation, and drive programmatic strategy for change.