Leeds Trinity University: “learning analytics helps us identify and support more at-risk students than ever”

Imagine you’re an 18-year-old trying to choose which university or college to go to, so you ask a few institutions what sets them apart. They’ll all have things they are proud of. If you ask Leeds Trinity University, ‘student support’ will be high on their list of answers.

“We always say that each student at Leeds Trinity is a name not a number,” says Meaghan Banham, the university’s head of student engagement and communications. “We have always invested in pastoral and academic care and now learning analytics is helping us respond more quickly with bespoke support.”

Widening participation
Leeds Trinity is a widening participation institution. Many students are the first in their families to go to university; others have personal circumstances that can make it hard to integrate into student life or reach their potential.

In recent years the university created a dedicated student support and engagement team with robust internal systems, and retention improved quickly. But the team wanted to use student data to develop even better support structures and senior managers gave the green light for learning analytics consultancy support from Jisc.

“We involved teaching staff and students in the procurement because we knew they’d have insights,” comments Meaghan. “Jisc’s solution appealed to the academics because it’s quick and easy for them to use. They also like being part of Jisc’s wider learning analytics user community.
“And it appealed to us because we could adapt the solution to meet our own needs.”

Learning analytics discovery
Leeds Trinity recognised that learning analytics projects are not IT projects and require institutional change.

To create a clear vision for the project and to start that change Jisc consultants ran discovery workshops with academics, IT leaders, professional support staff, senior managers and students. The outcomes informed the university’s business case for learning analytics and identified the challenges, data gaps, systems and process issues to work on.

“The workshops showed how committed teaching staff are to supporting students and gave us an opportunity to understand what we needed to do with our data,” says Meaghan. “We saw how important it was to take things steadily and make sure we had the processes right.”

Speedy interventions
Jisc’s learning analytics specialists worked with Leeds Trinity to provide specialist support to implement Data Explorer. It has been up and running since 2021. Data from many different systems now feeds into the data hub and all staff with a role in supporting students can see it via the Data Explorer dashboards. The data sources include student attendance, library and VLE records.

Obvious markers for non-engagement include non-attendance at lectures and tutorials, as well as late or missing assignments. The student support team can spot these almost immediately and they send the student an SMS to ask if they need support via Janet txt. Experiments have shown this gets attention and a response.

They record whatever happens next, for example if the student doesn’t reply or they say they have a difficulty. Or perhaps they’ll say everything is fine even when it isn’t. But as Meaghan says:

“Just because a student doesn’t disclose it, that doesn’t mean there isn’t a problem.”

1 DataExplorer is a SaaS system, an off-the-shelf solution that is flexible to be used across different institutions
2 DataExplorer is Jisc’s learning analytics system
The student support team don’t take a response like this at face value. Instead, they raise it at their meetings with the level tutors (who co-ordinate the personal tutors) to discuss data about students they’re concerned about. On several occasions the personal tutors have known about other circumstances that explain a student’s sudden absence or inability to complete work on time. This extra layer of context makes it easier for student support to tailor their next interaction and is part of Leeds Trinity University’s commitment never to make decisions on a student’s engagement without a human intervention.

In addition, all students meet their personal tutor three times each term. At these meetings they can see what information the university holds, review their progress and engagement data in Data Explorer and discuss any additional support they need.

Do students find all this intrusive? “No,” says Meaghan. “We spend a lot of time communicating with students about why we gather and use student data, so they understand the benefits. Far from being intrusive, our approach means they only need to explain their issues once and then we’ll offer help.”

The Students’ Union has been involved in learning analytics from the start – the SU president sat on the project board and championed the benefits of learning analytics.

**Developments**

Already, learning analytics is helping them identify and support more students at risk of disengaging with their studies or needing support. And now that university life is returning to normal after lockdowns the student support and engagement team are pushing ahead with plans to embed and develop the solution to improve the student experience even more.

Meaghan said: “In 2022 we’ll have our first in-person Freshers’ Fair in three years and we will promote what learning analytics helps us do. At the same time, we are having conversations with current students to explain how we can help them enjoy a happier student life and better outcomes.

“And academics are working in a steering group with professional and support services to get the solution embedded consistently so we can do even more.”