

Creating an oasis of calm from a sea of chaos: looking back on lessons learned to support students to thrive

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The 2020-21 academic year was a year unlike any other. Many students beginning university in September 2020 found themselves moving away from the support of their friends and family and starting their degree under challenging circumstances. In September 2021 we will welcome students to our institutions with a whole new suite of known unknowns and unknown unknowns, for them and us. However, we can build on the lessons learned from 2020/21. Here we share some of the techniques that we developed during 2020/21 as we strove to build a supportive and nurturing virtual learning space for >200 students taking our Biology modules and reflect on which of these may be beneficial going forward. By reimagining our role as educators, listening to the students and being responsive to student feedback, we found new ways to help our students thrive and learnt that we were able to hear our students in ways we had not experienced when teaching primarily face-to-face.

CHECK IN
Please place a symbol in the quadrant that best describes how you feel today

I am on top of things, but tired	I am on top of things and still have energy
I am worried, anxious and exhausted embedded.sci@uea.ac.uk embedded.fmh@uea.ac.uk	I am worried and anxious but still have energy

Figure 1: Example check-in slide which was used for students to anonymously indicate their mental well-being at that point in time.

What topic would you most like help with today?
(Feel free to write any topic you'd like help with, or choose the summative essay)

Summative Essay

Figure 2: Example introductory slide used for Q&A sessions for students to anonymously indicate topics they may need support with in that session.

Week 9 Check List		✓
Disease & Immunity Learning Strip <i>(Materials for these are available in Learning strip)</i>		
Week 9	Lectures	3. Innate Immunity
	Enhancement materials	4. Inflammatory Response
Workshop <i>(Attend your timetabled session)</i>		How to Improve Your Essay Make sure you have the feedback from your formative essay with you
Summative Assignment		
Check the Summative Assessment folder for details of this assessment		
View resources at the end of Evolution Learning Strip for additional materials on this topic		
Exam Preparation		
Attend your timetabled live Q&A session to get practice MCQs, ask us questions and get help with any troublesome topics		
Make sure you look at the "What to Know" documents that Kelly has posted as an announcement		
Important University Announcement		
At 1:45pm on Friday 20/11 all students <u>were sent</u> an email containing very important information. Please make sure you have read this email by the end of this week.		

Figure 3: Example checklist which was uploaded on to the VLE at the start of each week along with a two-minute long explanatory video.

The academic year 2020/21 was unrelenting. Together with our students we built a community based on openness, honesty, shared experiences and empathy. Whilst we were not all weathering the same storm, we were all in a boat on rough seas, we were in it together and we all learnt many important and valuable lessons along the way. Through gaining the confidence of our students, we were better able to support them through this challenging academic year as they made their transition into university.