Transcript of the Kirsty Wayland Memorial Disability Lecture 2025

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Richard Partington

Good evening, everybody. And welcome to this the third Kirsty Wayland Memorial Lecture and the 20th lecture in the original series of annual lectures on questions related to disability hosted by the ADRC, the Accessibility and Disability Resource Centre of the University. My name is Richard Partington I'm the Senior Tutor here at Saint John's College.

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It falls to me to make the dreaded health and safety announcement; no fire drill is planned. If there's a fire, there's a big door there and another big door to go down the stairs to quit the building. Thank you. For those of you who don't know, Kirsty Wayland was a long serving, brilliant and beloved colleague whom we continue greatly to miss.

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It's a particular pleasure again to welcome Matt, Kirsty's husband, to the lecture this evening. And we always think of Kirsty, on this occasion, as on many others. Warmest thanks as ever to the ADRC team for all your hard work in setting up and running this event and also to the Saint John's College conference and catering team for their support.

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It's a privilege as well as a pleasure for this college to host this event this year as in most years, and the ADRC team have also be, to thank the college for, ongoing backing of the lecture, and for the college's generosity in providing this space. And it's the least we can do. Sincere thanks also to the University's EDI team – Equality, Diversity and Inclusion – for their continued financial support for this important event.

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We always try to make these occasions as accessible as we can. There are BSL interpreters and live captioning at the event this evening, and an accessible recording will be made available after the lecture. This annual lecture seems to me more important almost every year. It's been a huge positive in my long career in the University of Cambridge to see a substantial increase in the participation of people with disabilities among our undergraduate and postgraduate students, and to have experienced a significant shift in our recognition of and provision of effective support in relation to different disabilities.

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This is a vital dimension of widening participation in the collegiate university, just as important as WP in relation to educational and social and other dimensions of personal background. But fighting complacency in relation to disability remains fundamental, and the annual lectures have repeatedly spoken informatively and inspirationally to topical issues regarding disability and the confluence of disability and education. This year's event will focus on the critical educational topic of competence standards, examination and assessment and disability, a matter brought to the fore by the recent tragic case involving a student at the University of Bristol, Natasha Abrahart.

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This evening's lecture will invite us to consider the legal and ethical responsibilities of higher education institutions, and how universities can ensure fair and inclusive academic standards for all students. We welcome in the audience Natasha's parents, Robert and Margaret. And please be aware that owing to the nature of the subject matter, there could be sensitive reference this evening to suicide.

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There will be a short Q&A after the panel discussion, mindful of the constraints of time, we'd be very grateful if audience members would please post questions in short form, so keep them as short as possible so that we can provide as many people as we can with the opportunity to raise a question. And there will be additional time for questions to the speakers in the reception after the event, which will take place downstairs where you all came in.

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I'm now greatly honoured to introduce my colleague and friend Alice Benton, the university's Director of Education services, whose tireless, imaginative and commonsensical work has been so important for students and colleagues in this university over more than two decades. Alice will give a short opening address introducing our speakers for the panel event this evening. Alice.

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Alice Benton

Good evening, everyone, and thanks for joining us for this year's annual disability lecture. Today's topic: “Competence standards and disability: What next for universities following the Abrahart case?” is both timely and deeply significant. We're here not only to reflect on institutional responsibilities and legal frameworks, but also to consider how we can ensure that higher education is fair, inclusive and supportive for all, especially for our disabled students.

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We do so with great care and respect, knowing that the issues that we are addressing today are rooted in the lived experiences of individuals and families, including Natasha Abrahart and her parents, who we’re honoured to welcome here today. The High Court judgment in Abrahart versus the University of Bristol has brought into sharp focus the responsibilities universities hold towards disabled students, particularly in how we design, deliver and assess academic learning.

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The ruling makes several key points very clear: universities must act when they become aware, whether formally or informally, that a student is experiencing difficulties related to disability. Reasonable adjustments must be considered and made promptly. It's not enough to rely solely on formal diagnosis or official disclosure. Staff have a duty to notice, to ask questions, and to seek advice.

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And importantly, the ruling makes a clear distinction between competence standards and modes of assessment. It emphasizes that while academics standards must be upheld, assessment methods themselves may often be adjusted to avoid placing disabled students at a disadvantage. This case calls on all of us to look closely at our

internal processes, our assumptions about assessment, and the inclusivity of our academic culture.

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It highlights the need for proactive, inclusive design, minimizing the need for individual adjustments by embedding flexibility and fairness from the outset. So let me welcome our speakers this evening. We're very fortunate to be joined today by two leading voices in this space, and I'm really excited to hear what they've got to talk to us about this evening. They've been working together to make meaningful change at the University of Leeds.

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So first is Harriet Cannon, who's the Disability Advisory Team Manager at Leeds and a national advocate for inclusive education. She's a Director of the National Association of Disability Practitioners and serves on a number of key advisory groups, including the Office for the Independent Adjudicators' Disability Expert Panel, Advance Age's Disabled Student Commitment Partnership Group and the Department of Education's Autism Advisory Group.

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She's also the founder of the Association for Autism Practitioners in Higher Education. Welcome, Harriet. Our second speaker is Professor Pam Birtill, who's the lead academic for assessment and feedback in the Department of Psychology at the University of Leeds. Her research spans global citizenship education, psychological literacy and assessment design. During the pandemic, she examined how students' transitions into university were affected, and her work on the hidden curriculum published by the QAA has shaped new thinking about fairness and transparency in Higher Education.

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Together, Harriet and Pam have laid led a major project at the University of Leeds, which I know John and his team have been following very closely to develop clear, inclusive competence standards across the full range of university programs. The work is both practical and grounded and nationally relevant. Please join me in welcoming Harriet and Pam.

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Harriet Cannon

Okay. Hello everyone. Thank you so much for those opening comments and remarks. Our first slide is introductions. We've done some of that, but just with a few additional comments. So yes, I am Harriet Cannon, the Disability Advisory Team Manager at the University of Leeds and a Director of the National Association of Disability Practitioners. Pam and I co-lead, along with our colleague Jenny Brady, the programme of work that we've been doing on competence standards at the University of Leeds, which is why we're here today, to talk to you if that's what you're expecting.

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I also just wanted to say that it is a particular honour to be presenting here tonight in Kirsty's memory, because Kirsty is the reason I'm a disability practitioner. She taught me very well going back almost 25 years now, when she had just started and I had just looked at a thing called SENDA, part of the Disability Discrimination Act.

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And Kirsty gave me a lot of training and a lot of support over the five years I worked at the Institute of Continuing Education. So it's a delight to be here. It's just a shame that she's not here with us.

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Pam Birtill

And so I'm Pam Birtill and I'm the academic lead for assessment and feedback across all of the University of Leeds. And in my role, I've been working to implement our assessment strategy and will tell you shortly, this has led to me working closely with Harriet on the competence standards work. So what we're going to do today is just go over a little bit.

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First of all, Harriet, talking about the context about what competence standards are, some details about the case and the response, and then I'm going to tell you about how

we've actually been trying to develop competence standards at University of Leeds. Some of the work that this has led to has certainly been very challenging. But we'll tell you about the progress and kind of how we're getting on, give some suggestions about how people might take this forward in universities and share our learning.

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I'm going to pass over to Harriet now, who is going to do the first half.

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Harriet Cannon

Thank you. Pam, before we continue with this lecture, we wanted to take a moment to remember Natasha Abrahart. There are several reasons for this, not least because Natasha's parents, as we've said, are here with us today. But really, all of the work that we've been doing and all of our focus and our time and our effort is really because of what happened to Natasha and what happened in Tasha's family after her death in April 2018.

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It's not lost on me that it's almost exactly seven years ago. Natasha was a second-year physics student at the University of Bristol when she took her own life and her family took the University of Bristol to court over her death. The case went up to the High Court on appeal, where, amongst other things, the University of Bristol was found to have discriminated against Natasha on grounds of disability.

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Natasha... let's get you through the slides. Natasha had significant social anxiety, and she was finding it difficult to engage with the elements of assessment that involved oral presentations or interviewing or speaking. The university was found not to have made reasonable adjustments to account for those difficulties that Natasha was experiencing. She had told her academic department of these difficulties.

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It wasn't a secret. The reason this is relevant is that the university held on to the arguments for giving oral presentations in front of a group of peers was a competence standard for physics, and this was found to be incorrect. We'll talk more about the impact of this ruling in later slides. But I wanted to take this moment to acknowledge Natasha and her family.

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We have a tendency in the sector to talk about the Abrahart case or the Bristol ruling, and I don't want to lose sight of the fact that Natasha was so much more than the court case that happened after her death, and we can never forget that there are humans and young people in particular at the centre of this work, and I owe it to them and to Natasha and her family to do better.

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And that's really been a driving force in our work at Leeds. When Natasha's case went to the High Court on appeal, the Equality and Human Rights Commission formally intervened. And that's because an element of the case involved an alleged, at the time, breach of the Equality Act 2010, and the EHRC is the enforcer of the Act. Following the case, the EHRC went on to issue what they call an advice of note, an advice note to the higher education sector, and that was issued in July 2024.

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It contains several recommendations around competence standards, including the following (it's abundantly clear it's a good read): “Review course criteria to check that competence standards are clearly defined, explained, and justified, and that methods of assessment are not wrongly described as ‘competence standards’.

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Ensure that academic staff setting assessments know which aspects of their test are competence standards which must be met and which aspects are the methods of assessment which may be reasonably adjusted” and finally, “Where competence standards are appropriate, review them to ensure they are not indirectly discriminatory.”

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It's a pretty clear direction of travel there. Competence standards are not a new concept. They are defined in the Equality Act, so that takes us back to 2010, but they were actually part of the Disability Discrimination Act before that. So we're talking 30

years we've had competence standards as a thing. Talking about competence standards and writing and publishing them is relatively new. We have had assumed competence standards for a long time:

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our lines in the sand that every academic will measure students against. We just haven't been good at articulating them, even to ourselves, let alone students, because higher education really likes to talk about concepts which involve variations of the word competence; competencies, competence, frameworks, competent: it's useful just to understand what they actually are. That first box, the top box is the formal Equality Act

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definition of a competence standard. It is in Equality Act language, so it's a little bit circular: 'An academic, medical or other standard applied for the purposes of determining whether or not a person has a particular level of competence or ability'. So that is fairly straightforward. Advance HE expounds on that a little bit further, and I quite like this because it demonstrates that competence is required at different levels and different parts of a

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student's journey. Advanced HE says, 'A competence standard is a particular level of competence or ability that a student must demonstrate to be accepted onto, progress within and successfully complete a course or programme of study'. So there are those gateways that students have to pass through at various points from admission all the way through. To try to think about this in a bit more detail, because it can feel a bit abstract if all you have is that slightly circular definition,

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here are some reasons why competence standards might be relevant at all. And we owe this slide to Duncan Abrahart, brother of Natasha, who wrote a fantastic Wonkhe article that is well worth a read; we've linked to it on our resources at the end. So why might you have a competence standard at all? Firstly, for health and safety reasons, or safeguarding, something about money, managing genuine risk, but remembering that disabled people are not inherently risky, they are no more risky than their non-disabled peers.

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They just may find themselves in environments that create additional risk. Vital interaction, either with people or equipment, in a way that is fundamentally integral to the course. Not something that we like students to be able to do, something that is integral to the course, real time, when something is genuinely time sensitive, can only be done within a certain time frame.

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One disposal gets use of an example. I don't think there's many universities teaching bomb disposal, but it might be something like time limited experiments where their efficacy is affected by the amount of time spent. I think Duncan used the example of setting glue, which is another good one: it sets when it sets, you can't have extra time. Motor and Sensory

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So something that requires a particular physical ability, that can only be done in one distinct way by one person. That can be a little bit trickier. We talked about that a lot in relation to dentistry recently, and visual acuity and manual dexterity to be a dentist. External or Regulatory. So this is to do with accreditation and qualification. So PSRBs, Professional Statutory and Regulatory Bodies in particular.

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But these are not the get out of jail free card that many people think they are. People have hidden behind PSRBs for a long time, and there is no longer any hiding that is also in the EHRC advice note. I don't have time to go into a lot of detail about PSRBs, but do feel free to ask questions later if you want to.

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Competence standards have to meet certain measures, certain requirements in order to be considered genuine. This is set out in the Equality and Human Rights Commission's technical guidance that accompanied the Equality Act, when it was published. Competence standards, and this will sound obvious, but you'd be surprised

how often it trips people up, must be applied equally to all students, and that includes disabled students.

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They must meet the same standards of competence. They must be objectively justifiable. And that means that a non-specialist must be able to understand the justification requiring the competence standards. The language that gets used a lot in the Equality Act is that it must be a proportionate means to a legitimate aim. What that means, in essence, is that the competence standard must be the most appropriate way of achieving the necessary aim of ensuring competence.

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It must be – and again, you'd think this is obvious – genuinely relevant to the course. This may seem like it's absolutely obvious, but as we saw at Bristol oral presentations in Physics, not necessarily genuinely related to the course. It has to be objectively measurable. There's not much point having a competence standard if we can't measure it, we can't see when it's happening and we can't tell students we measure it.

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And that's why there's such an integral relationship between competence standards and assessments. There's a couple of other points that are important too. A competence standard must also be explicit and it must be articulated clearly and inclusively so that it doesn't inadvertently exclude someone through the language used. We see that a lot around soft skills in particular, and it needs to be understandable to someone with no core specific knowledge, largely because pre-applicants (17 and 18 year olds) need to understand what is expected of them before they sign on the dotted line.

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My 17 year-old daughter is sick of competence standards because I run them past her a lot.

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As I said, there is this integral link between competence standards and assessments, and we have to understand how we demonstrate a competence standard. And that's the assessment bit. So that's what we need to do in order for it to be genuine. In most cases, the assessment method itself will not constitute a genuine competence standard. Again, that is a tricky one for some people to grasp.

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The Equality Act is really clear on the need to separate the assessment method from the competence standard in most instances, and this is what was in that same technical guidance, it said, “Although there is no duty to make reasonable adjustments to the application of a competence standard, such a duty does apply to the process by which competence is assessed.”

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So although an education provider has no duty to alter a competence standard, it needs to consider whether or not a reasonable adjustment could be made to some aspects of the process by which it assesses a competence standard. In the High Court ruling in the Abrahart case, the judge explained that it would be vanishingly rare for an assessment method to be considered a genuine competence standard.

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It's also worth noting that assessment methods don't just mean formal exams and coursework. They might also include things like using specific software or things like study abroad or industrial placement years, as well.

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What the law tells us is that universities do not need to make adjustments to genuine competence standards, but they have to make reasonable adjustments to other elements. The duty to make reasonable adjustments for disabled students applies to learning outcomes, which are not competence standards – in all cases – teaching methods and assessment methods, but not to the competence standard itself.

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The ever-living grey area is PSRB requirements. They sit slightly between the two; they shouldn't do, but they do at the moment. So things like the General Medical Council are not very clear. Actually, it's not the General Medical Council are becoming much more clear. Some of the other PSRB's are not very clear in their articulation of competence and how it relates to assessments and that leaves it open to interpretation, which is a dangerous place to be.

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The premise of this lecture series is disability. So I wanted to make clear the entire relationship between competence, standards, disability and reasonable adjustments. It's impossible to separate them from one another. Interrogating competence standards means working out who might be excluded and why. Thinking about how we assess students and why and working out where the flexibility in assessment lies is also critical.

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Doing this work enables us to be clear and transparent with students, especially disabled students, so they can make informed choices about their programmes of study and not be tripped up by the application of competence standards halfway through their course, when it's often too late. It enables Higher Education Providers to meet their anticipatory duty under the Equality Act – the bit of the duty that we are quite good at forgetting – by doing the work to think through barriers in advance and then working to build in that flexibility to remove or mitigate those barriers.

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It's much easier if you do it ahead of time. It's much more difficult to do it on an individual basis if we get competence standards right, and most importantly, do the thinking necessary to define them in the first place. Disability teams like mine will spend much less time trying to work out where reasonableness lies, and less time explaining and negotiating with academic colleagues.

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We'll also have to engage less with disability services about these things, and students, importantly, will spend much less time stuck in mitigation processes, which are often about assessment and competence. Doing the work to define competence standards is

part of the journey towards inclusive pedagogies; surfacing our requirements, interrogating them, articulating them inclusively and assessing them in ways that don't disadvantage students, doesn't just work for disabled students, it benefits all students

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as is so often the case for any adjustments that you make for disabled students. It's also a really important tool for fostering belonging. We like to talk a lot about belonging in the sector. This is one way to foster it.

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So a couple more slides before handing over to Pam. One of them is a bit long, but firstly I'm just going to give you a little bit of context about the University of Leeds. So we're a Russell Group University and I point that out because Russell Group Universities have a bit of a reputation for being slow to change.

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It's like turning the proverbial oil tanker. We have around 40,000 students registered at the university, about 10,000 staff, of whom over 4000 are academic staff teaching across over 600 taught programmes, and our disabled student percentage is around 22% for home students.

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So now we've talked a bit about our contacts at Leeds. I want to take you on a little bit of a journey, and the reason I do this is to show you that nothing happens quickly or easily in Higher Education. So let's cast our minds back to 2010, when I was about three years in post in Disability Services.

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I'd been there a long time. Along came the Equality Act, and helpfully, the technical guidance that helped explain the Act to those of us in Higher Education. My colleague and our co-lead Jenny Brady and I were working together, and we were thinking about competence standards quite a long time before we were really properly concentrating on them, partly through our casework with disabled students, autistic students in my case, and students with specific learning difficulties.

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In Jenny's case, and partly because Jenny was working on a project that went on forever to create an inclusive marking policy, it seemed like the Equality Act might make things easier because it provided additional clarity around things like assessments and reasonable adjustments. But of course, nothing happens quickly in Higher Education. In 2015, we published our exclusive exam paper and guidance.

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It did take us five years. We were delivering training on this, when we were linking inclusive assessment to competence standards to try to help academic colleagues work out what they were actually trying to assess through exam questions. As a picture of us up there, presenting at an NADP conference 2019. Some of you may remember the 2017 government paper entitled, snappily, 'Inclusive Teaching and Learning and Higher Education as a Route to Excellence', which attempted to remind Higher Education Providers of their responsibilities under the Equality Act.

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The paper also highlighted the risks of not being clear on competence standards or flexible on their assessments.

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That paper really spurred us on, and particularly Jenny, who developed a set of inclusive baseline standards in 2018, which forms a framework for ensuring that practices meet learning and teaching needs of less diverse student body.

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Early in 2020, the university published its ten-year strategy, which had inclusivity as one of the four core values. We are a community where everyone is welcome and belongs. Probably sounds familiar. The strategy was launched just before a little thing called Covid came along. Covid and the instantaneous pivot to online learning actually helped a lot with our ongoing conversations around what it is that we're trying to teach students, rather than just how.

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In 2021, the university launched an ambitious ten-year programme of change called ‘Curriculum Redefined’, with the aim of transforming our portfolio of programmes again with inclusivity at its heart. And this is where things got interesting, because running this big programme meant that some existing academic colleagues were given defined roles, with one particular set of responsibilities to review parts of our curriculum.

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And one of those was Professor Pam Birtill, who is the academic lead on reviewing assessment and feedback at an institutional level. Everything changed in 2022 when Pam happened to come along to a briefing I was doing for our school academic lead on Inclusive Pedagogies, where I was talking about assessments, reasonable adjustments and competence standards. Pam has the admirable ability of asking the right questions at the right times and listening to the answers, which, believe me, is refreshing in disability services.

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She contacted me after the session and told me she had spotted an opportunity to connect work around reasonable adjustments and competence standards to the assessment strands of Curriculum Redefined. And from that point on, we were turbo charged and the Developing Competence Standards project was born in April 2022, one month before the County Court ruling in the Abrahart case. We have one core objective: to define competence standards across all our 639 taught programmes and publish these by May 2025.

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(we say in the last couple of weeks of April) and Pam is not going to take you through a bit more of how we've done all of that.

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Pam Birtill

So thank you, Harriet. I'm not only good at asking probably awkward questions, and listening. I also have a remarkable naivete that if we try hard enough, we might actually manage to do stuff. And people don't tell me that we can't, fast enough. And so we get things done a little bit. When Harriet came and talked to me and explained to me about everything, I had some understanding of what was going on.

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Because I avidly read Wonkhe. I sort of started at basics. What did we have at Leeds already? What was our policy on reasonable adjustments? And we didn't have one. So that struck me as being actually quite problematic, where we were wanting to develop inclusive approaches and me wanting to understand what to do when we can't be inclusive because you can't be inclusive for everybody, all the time.

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So we looked across the sector. As well as being naïve, I pilfer things where I can. And actually we found that the University of Cambridge had already a really good policy on reasonable adjustments. So we took it and adapted it with permission. We kind of wrote it, going, here's this lovely policy, we'll figure out the details later.

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And that didn't quite get through governance because the risk that was attached to it scared them. So I went and had a one-to-one with our Deputy Vice Chancellor and sort of pointed out to him that actually there's individual liability for academics within the Equality Act. We therefore have got to do something. So we said, okay, go and tighten up the policy, come up with a way of implementing it.

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So we did, and we got that through our processes.

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So what we then did was we got this policy ratified in 2023. So reasonable adjustments policy accepts that we're not inclusive, except that sometimes we need to make these adjustments.

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But what we needed to do was to be able to define when we made adjustments, and that required that we had competence standards across all of the programmes. Now, parts of Curriculum Redefined as this large ten-year funded project was that there was

resource, and as part of redefining all of our programmes, we were writing learning outcomes, rethinking assessments.

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I kind of think we just had an extra box on the form that says, ‘competence standards’. And nobody said, ‘No’; so we did. And then we realized that actually there's quite a lot more work involved in this than just adding a box. And so we started to think about how it was that we could actually do this and what we had to do about it.

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So this is where I go slightly a bit academic on it for which I apologize. I took the ideas of Community of Practice theory. Community of Practice is this idea that not everybody has to be expert in everything, but we are a community where we have got a set of common goals, and our common goals in this case is to deliver our teaching inclusively, to be compassionate to our students and that we can develop our competence standards for our programmes.

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So this common goal we think about is, “How as an organization can we can deliver this?” And we have in a Community of Practice absolute experts; they're the people kind of in the centre. And then you've got people who are doing the job, and they're what's called legitimate peripheral participants, they’re around the edge.

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And so Harriet has clearly, you know, all of our experts in terms of understanding disability inclusive practice, but we've also got experts in Geography and we've got experts in Health Care. And within each of these disciplines, we need to develop the expertise, because competence standards can't be generic. One of the conversations was, “Can't you just set for across the whole university and we'll just use those?”

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No, it has to be different because it's particular. It's got to be that legitimate aim that's justifiable for the programme. So what we took this idea of Community of Practice,

developing Communities of Practice, and developing expertise within Schools. So this is a different way of doing things; basically it's a train the trainer approach.

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We worked to upskill our core group. (And I say we work to upskill, but it was Harriet and Jenny.) I now have learned a huge amount of stuff about competence standards and disability, for which I thank them greatly. We've developed this expertise now across the institution, we've got a lot of different stakeholders in this work.

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We've got our disability services colleagues, we've got assessment leads who are experts in assessment within their Schools. We've got our inclusive pedagogies leads within each school. We've got people on staff development teams. We've got people in Equality, we've got Project

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Managers. And actually they have been completely fantastic. To anybody who kind of talks about 'too much management', Project Managers have meant we've got this stuff done where we couldn't have done otherwise, and we are all learning together. Harriet is our expert in the disability stuff, but we can talk to people in Geography, and people in Geography will explain to us,

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"Well, actually no, we have got these visual ways of doing analysis and therefore maybe visual needs to be in here." And we have these conversations. We've got experts in the subject matters, subject matter experts, and we respect their expertise while working in a partnership with them, where they respect the expertise of our disability colleagues. We have acknowledged and we have talked at length with academic colleagues and one of those, about how being uncomfortable is part of learning.

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And many academic colleagues have found it difficult to do this work because the approach we have taken is

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have a go and get some feedback. It's kind of like assessment with formative stuff in that and yeah, they find that uncomfortable sometimes. So we've taken an approach where people have a go at their competence standards, informed by the training we've provided.

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We give them feedback that it's not very inclusive, maybe think about effectively communicate rather than oral presentation. And that has enabled us to be able to develop competence standards which are not perfect, but they're getting there, they're improved. And as part of these conversations, Harriet will tell you about shortly, this has changed the way that people are talking about assessment and the way that they're talking about inclusivity across the institution.

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So we had as part of this, we had to make some design decisions. How do we do this stuff? My naivety again. Well, we have to do it at module level, surely? And then it's, okay, no we've got 640 odd programmes I don't know how many modules we've got. We've got one School that's even got 500 modules: module level

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not possible. So we've gone for programme level. We're trying to make sure that academics are well trained. And we're doing this through Train the Trainer sessions, where we've got a core group of people who take Harriet's brilliant materials and deliver them. And sometimes I have to go. Yeah, I don't know the answer to your question. We're displaying vulnerability in our leadership within this work because there are things that we don't know, and the sector hasn't figured out how to do all of these things.

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But we're having a go and we're trying to make it better. People submit their competence standards. We then have a panel which gives them feedback. The feedback isn't always brilliant because we're all still learning. We have this iterative process, and at some

point we're going to have to go, ‘Beginning of May,’ we said, ‘Yes, they're good enough and we're going to publish them’.

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So again, there's nervousness about how we do that and about how we can say that these are good enough and we're having to kind of to some extent go, ‘We've given it our best shot, we've justified it.’ We'll have to iterate if it's not right, and we will do our best within that to, it’s best efforts all the way through.

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We're going to be publishing our competence standards on our programme catalogue. And I think our first draft, our first set of them are ready to go out in May. They will be publicly available for some Schools. Some Schools are taking a little bit longer. We are turning an oil tanker around in about 18 months. I think it's okay that we're maybe not quite hitting our May target, 100%.

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And we've had to think about how we challenge our PSRBs. So actually we produce template letters and we're having conversations with the PSRBs and we're working as collaboratively as we can, because PSRBs are not some magical God-given thing that comes down in tablets from the sky. They're comprised of academics and subject experts.

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So we can talk to them. They are us. They aren't some external alien thing. We need to just engage with them and talk about the work.

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Other questions up there and other things we've had to deal with. You know, people are busy, people had to make time for things. But it's been supported by project managers. So project managers in each School have tracked it through the process, have encouraged, cajoled, and ultimately, made sure that we've got what we've got. One of the things that I think is just so brilliant about this work, and I am dead proud of it.

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Our participants who have been involved in the training have found this to be – within their own academic careers – transformational because what they've said, the quotes are up here. For example, “Before I undertook this task and before I underwent the training of writing competence standards, I considered myself a person who was not fully aware of our obligations related to disability…

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The training itself made me reflect on my own teaching practices, my approaches to them and challenge my own beliefs while making plans to change and adapt.” This is changing culture, which is a really hard thing to do at universities, and I genuinely think we're doing that. So it's had impacts on the people who are doing the delivery of the training.

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People have tried to write the competence standards. People have given that feedback, the project managers and supporting actors who have supported us to get this work done. And where have we got to? What have we done? So policy and process, kind of the tedious stuff. But it's the bricks and mortar, isn't it? We've got our reasonable adjustments policy, that's agreed.

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We've got the paperwork where people are having to specify the competence standards. We've got a fantastically detailed competence standards SharePoint, that everybody can access in the university, with videos from Harriet, with forms, with examples, with case studies. We've had training sessions where we've trained 25 academics across the institution. So people in every single faculty, we've had training delivered to over 120 staff across 13 faculty areas, 21 workshops.

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So far, we've got monthly review panels where we check over the competence standards and provide feedback, weekly catch ups with the project team where they keep us on track and tell us how many we're through, what percentage we've got, and

we are getting quite a long way there. So we have got outputs, we have changed what we're doing.

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Speaker 4

Right. Harriet's going to come join me now and talk about the impact this has had on her team.

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Harriet Cannon

I thought it would just be helpful to pick that comment up, particularly as we're talking about disability and we're talking about the impact on disabled students, but also teams like mine in very busy, understaffed, overwhelmed disability services teams. This is qualitative impact. We need to keep up to date. So we will do that at some point, though not immediately.

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We should also point out that we have day jobs, Pam and I, that's not competence standards. We do this around the side of our quite busy day jobs. So from my perspective of managing a large team of disability practitioners, one of the things that's been really evident the last few months is that we are having much quicker and easier conversations about reasonable adjustments, especially around assessments, but also around teaching and learning and things like practical work placements and study abroad.

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We are starting the conversation much further down the line than we used to, which was, “Under the Equality Act, disability means…” We are making progress on that. That's especially helpful given that we don't have any mandatory disability awareness training as a university. Many universities don't. That's another thing in the EHRC advice notes. We're seeing much more flexibility in assessment methods.

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People are thinking of these themselves, we're not having to tell them, they're having a go at different types of assessment methods. We're having really productive conversations, especially about things like group assessment through group work and oral presentations, the two types of assessment that seem to generate the most casework for disabled students. We're seeing much greater clarity on inclusion versus exclusion, and a better understanding of actually when it's right to exclude certain groups of students, which is actually just as important as working out when to include as many as possible.

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That's been a little bit of a light bulb moment. We're seeing a much more human response to disabled students, at least in the conversations that my team are having with academics. There's a better understanding that disability is not static, that some of the barriers might be your fault, and the disabled students are not monolithic, and that understanding that the impact of disability and the barriers that we create as institutions is important and something we can tackle.

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There's also – and this is a good bit from my perspective – much more respect for disability services. We still have a long way to go. We're definitely much further ahead both through the back up that we now have in policy, but also because of the conversations we're having in this area and a growing awareness of our expertise. I've had to do work with my team to remind them that they are experts in disability.

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They don't have to be experts in astrophysics. Somebody else is the expert in that, collaborating much more closely and equally with academic staff. We've seen that, particularly in our Medicine School, whether it's through this project or through case work and that is a wonderful thing.

00:43:40:29 - 00:44:02:27

Pam Birtill

So we are only part-way through the process. We have not got everywhere yet. We are about to have final sign off for those agreed competence standards that we have gone, "Yes, they're good enough" and that's as far as we're getting at the moment. The next

thing is to get student feedback, because all of this work is meaningless unless it impacts the students.

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It's got to positively impact the students and their experiences of assessment. So we need to get students' voice into that and look at what they think of our competence standards. Do they understand them? Do they reflect their experience? We need to publish those competence standards. And then what we need to do is we need to look at the implementation of them in assessment, because until we're actually testing them out, we don't know that they're going to be okay.

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And so that's been some of the nervousness around kind of going, "Yeah, they're good enough" because people are going, "Can you get legally approved? Can somebody say that these are okay?" We've got to try it out. That's the only way that we can do it. We've got to have that vulnerability and that learning mindset where we try and figure this out.

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And that is unusual within a university. It doesn't feel safe for people, and we are going to continue to hopefully contribute to sector guidance and help the rest of the sector do what we've done, because I think we have done some quite good stuff. So how can you do this if you were at a university or how can you do this within your organizations?

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We can start by looking at the data that we've got and that drives a lot of behaviour. So awarding gaps are really important for accessing participation plans. The Office for Students is talking to people about a lot of that. We need to know what's going on within disabled students' case studies, what's happening, how a student is being supported, where is it going wrong?

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I get emails from Harriet quite often going, "This is one of the sorts of things you might like to know about that's happening", which makes it okay. That goes in the file. This is useful. It's all useful data. Allyship is really important. We could not have done what we

have done firstly without working together, but also without that senior stakeholder engagement.

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So Professor Jeff Grabill, who is our deputy Vice-Chancellor, has really championed this work. Professor Alice O'Grady, who is Dean of Students Education, Quality and Standards really supported this work. Jenny Lyon who is our head of Quality, has really supported this work. That senior buy-in has been transformational. And then continuing on that theme, we need those collaborators.

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So our academic development colleagues who have gone and talked and really got down into some detail and then said, "Right, this is the detail. Now come and talk to us about it." I must thank very much one of our colleagues, Sarah Birrell, who's the Project Manager, who has done absolutely mammoth work on this going through and checking consistency of quality of competence standards across whole numbers of programmes:

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absolutely amazing work. You can't do everything. You can't train everybody. Not everybody needs to be an expert. So taking a Community of Practice approach, which is a genuine Community of Practice where you've got people who move between different communities, bringing their expertise with them, is really effective. It is time effective, and it also helps to build that collaboration, to that culture change thing.

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Think of your organization as a learning organization and centre that; use that to explain the work while you're doing it like you are, and delegate; train up as many people as you can within schools and within those areas of expertise. It involves a lot of cake. And cups of tea.

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Okay. Just the final, final slide, because Alice is in the audience and she'll kill me if I don't say it. I thought it'd be useful to let you know about what's happening in the sector

around this. And in particular, the fact that there will be sector guidance. So we know that trying to start work on competence standards with no guidance is very difficult, because that's where we were about two years ago.

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Some of that guidance is going to be launched at an event in Westminster on Thursday that Pam and I are going to, and several people in this room. There will also be training materials that will be available to the sector. It's a collaborative effort between the National Association of Disability Practitioners, Advance HE and the Disabled Student Commitment, which also talks about competence standards.

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Just if you thought you could get away with it for a bit longer. We're also having ongoing conversations with PSRBs, there is a sub-interest group of the Disabled Student Commitment Partnership groups that is specifically looking at PSRBs, because we know that's an area that really needs some focus and attention. So watch this space. There will be more information out there on the AdvanceHE website imminently with some

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practical guidance, resources and further information. You should be having a copy of these slides I think, afterwards so you'll be able to click on those links. Some of the most helpful bits of guidance that are out there, including Duncan's one Wonkhe article, which is definitely worth a read. And it just leads for us to say, are there any questions or comments?