DEBBIE: We’ll get straight into it and meet these two dedicated and enthusiastic assistive technology speciaIists from Western Sydney. So welcome Sally Lego and Natalie McLaughlin and they are both going to be presenting on the COVID attitude. An exciting new normal for assistive technology at Western Sydney University. So Sally and Natalie have extensive in the assistive technology space and are strong advocates for inclusion and accessibility in education and beyond. So a welcome to you both and I'm handing over to you.

NATALIE: Great. Thanks, Debbie, for having us and thanks, everyone, we're excited to be here today. It is great to see you all joining us. Sally and I are presenting from Darug land and would like to acknowledge the traditional owners, custodians and Elders past, present and emerging and warmly welcome any First Nations people with us in the session today. We’ll be sharing with you how we tackled head on the challenges COVID-19 placed on our service within Western Sydney University, how we addressed the limitations and constrictions with an approach that resulted in positive and scalable improvements and we’ll share how the shift online has let us garner new collaborative relationships through Western and has supported the wider uptake of assistive technology, building a more inclusive environment. So for any questions, as we said, pop them in the chat and we will answer them as we go through. We’re also going to add links to the captioned version of our videos as well. And if you're following along with the slides yourself, you will hear the ding each time we transition to the slides. Excellent there. That’s the ding. Excellent. Okay. I’ll just get that sharing happening with Sal.

SALLY: Is that working?

NATALIE: I’m not sure if that’s coming up correctly on the shared screen. I think we’re sharing a different screen there.

DEBBIE: Hi, it’s Debbie here. I can see your notes as well. Is there a way we can go to –

NATALIE: Just share a different screen, I think.

DEBBIE: Fantastic.

SALLY: I’ve done this a number of times and I’ve never gotten that one wrong yet but there’s a first time for everything. Is that one better?

NATALIE: There we go. That’s great. Okay.

SALLY: All right. Now, let’s start at the beginning. What is assistive technology, otherwise known as AT? Well, quite simply, it is technology that assists or that helps. It really is any device, system or design that provides people with practical solutions to enhance their learning, day-to-day activities and working lives. It is also considered adaptive technology. Adapting the use of a technology to suit your needs. So we're going to run that quick poll now, to gauge what assistive or adaptive technologies you’re already using, whether regularly or not. This should hopefully pop up in front of you right about now. Lovely. Please select all the options that apply to you. So the questions are: do you use Siri or Google Assistant? So this could be for anything from finding the weather or making a phone call. Have you dictated messages to your phone? Do you use GPS, for example, Google Maps for directions? I certainly know I probably wouldn't get anywhere without them. Have you listened to an audio book? Have you zoomed in on parts of your phone or tablet screen to see it better. I will just give a minute because I can see everybody is still answering those and then we will have a look at the results.

DEBBIE: Yes. Some great responses coming through. I know my favourite is the Google Maps.

SALLY: Nearly everybody has used Google Maps or something similar. All right. Looks like we’ve petered off so we might close that poll. Sharing the results. So having a look at those, about half of us have used Siri or Google Assistant and dictate messages. Most of us have used a map or Google Maps or something like that. More than half of us listen to audio books and most of us have zoomed in on a screen to see things better. So there we go. We’ll stop sharing those. That’s good. We’ll get that out of the way. All right. So AT has often been equated with people with a disability and disability barriers are certainly the driving force behind why some technologies are developed the way they are. But as you can hopefully start to see, the majority of people are already using accessibility features in every day devices or adaptations of technologies created to address disability barriers, disability or not. This is the concept we have grabbed on to in our role at Western. Normalisation of AT.

NATALIE: So Western’s AT provides the flexibility to study, to learn and to work your way and in our roles as AT specialists we're committed to finding the best match of software to suit the needs of both the staff and students that we work with. This includes three of our licensed and supported softwares, Dragon, Read & Write, Sonocent and Audio Note-Taker and what we’re going to do is have a little look at how Sonocent can help staff now.

VOICEOVER: Are you constantly struggling to take minutes in your meetings? Do you get stuck working out who said what and when? Do you miss key pieces of information? Do you need to transcribe work word-for-word? Then you need Sonocent. Sonocent Audio Note-Taker records audio and will capture what was said by everyone in your meeting or focus group with tools to highlight and categorise content, a space for your notes, for agenda items, including those important papers, you won't miss a thing with Sonocent Audio Note-taker.

SALLY: Sonocent is great note-taking software and it has useful applications to so many people, not just students. Okay. So where did Natalie and I start? Well, AT at Western is located within our IT Department and up until March this year was handled by me. One person delivering AT access and training to all students who needed it on every campus. With an ever-growing student base and no capacity to see students more than once, I realised very quickly this was more than a one woman job and applied for extra support. Interested staff within IT became my subject matter experts and they were on campus and on hand when required to help students with installation and problem-solving. Then with the help of student services.

NATALIE: I came next and with an additional specialist we were able to start seeing more students and make faster progress through the student wait lists. Now, Western is a multi-campus university with eight campuses in the greater Western Sydney region. This meant a lot of travelling across all the campuses and I've been at the university for over 20 years in various roles but I saw more campuses in that two weeks seeing students than I had ever before. And two weeks, you ask, that’s right. A fortnight after starting this position COVID came along, as did the restrictions. So on top of my new changing role I also had to learn a lot of new technology fast. What I found was that what I was sharing with the students, like Dragon, was actually helping me get through my work more accurately and efficiently. So let's take a look at Dragon now.

VOICEOVER: Have you wanted to train a dragon? Well, now you can. Dragon is a dictation software and when you train your dragon, it will dictate faster than you can type. It can even complete tasks for you so you can work hands-free. Let your dragon do the hard work for you. Used by staff and students across Western to dictate reports, emails, assignments and more. Come and join the fun. Online training and support supplied.

SALLY: Okay. So having this software and knowing the value it can have and that it can provide really pushed us to embrace the changes forced on us by COVID. Working from home, studying online, additional carer responsibilities like home schooling of children, COVID threw a lot of challenges at everyone. On one level, life became more simple, Natalie and I didn’t need to travel anymore, which was kind of nice, and yet at the same time we now had other complexities to consider, like how to connect with students online who struggled with technology and how to provide the additional support required without additional resourcing. We saw these limitations and constrictions and we started to work on addressing them really quickly. With the support of our management, within the first month we designed and implemented a new service model. We didn't just digitise what we had been doing previously, which was one-hour appointments with a student, we offered different appointment types and different resources for different situations. We stepped up our training and support of other IT staff so that AT users could get faster, improved access to tech support through the IT service desk. Just like with any other technology supported at the university.

NATALIE: We also looked at other areas where we could improve. We also enhanced the communication with key stakeholders, including improving our referral system with the disability services.

SALLY: We established an AT support website and engaged external stakeholders to develop exclusive training content for us. A big thanks to Jim Spiralis, if he’s out there in the audience today.

NATALIE: And we also created an online booking system using Microsoft Bookings to reduce manual admin costs. For this one, I’ve got to say that was a huge win for us.

SALLY: So all of these changes allowed us to improve communication with students and increased our student employment capacity by 20%, which let us get through the wait list faster than we ever could have face-to-face. Our initiative led to a more personalised approach with greater support and instant access to AT software and training that was scalable in the delivery.

NATALIE: And as a result we no longer have to limit our service and can now support and provide this to all Western students. We have connected with units across Western, creating partnerships with places like the library and that helps us to improve the student experience and what we’ve found working with these teams is that it is mutually beneficial for us as colleagues and also for the students. We're lucky enough to have qualitative evidence to support the success of our initiatives and that continues to encourage us to do our best work.

SALLY: As a quick summary, responses from staff and students using our service feedback form show 100% satisfaction with 90% being extremely satisfied with their most recent experience with our service.

NATALIE: And all responses show they're either strongly agreed or agree that the support they received from us has made a positive difference from them and they achieved what they wanted during our interactions.

SALLY: 70% of respondents reported that their overall experience with the service was extremely easy. The rest finding it somewhat easy. So we know we have a little bit of room for improvement there.

NATALIE: With the results being quite positive and our aim being to promote the products and service more lives, we're happy to report 95% of respondents identifying that they're likely to recommend the services to others at Western. While that's great data, what we actually like to see is people. So what we created was an opportunity for students to connect with one another and the staff supporting them through a community hour digital drop-ins. These are definitely our favourite part of the week and it helped beat the isolation many of us were experiencing. They have also worked in another way by helping us identify and build AT champions around the university.

SALLY: One of our regular student community attendees provided the feedback, and I quote, “These sessions always add some value, even if not directly relevant to my experience. It really is beginning to feel like a community. Most importantly, I do not feel like I've been given access to software and left to my own devices. Instead, there is appropriate support available to help me engage with the software so that it makes a relevant and significant contribution to my learning and negates the impact my disability would otherwise present". We think there's not much in terms of higher praise and we're really happy that the community is supporting our students.

NATALIE: But staff haven't missed out because we’ve also been able to start building a staff community on our Yammer internal service, which is based around the technologies we have been able to make available to them as well, sharing how AT provides flexibility. Let's look at another video that shows how our staff and students can get flexibility in their workday, thanks to Read & Write.

VOICEOVER: Are your eyes strained from too much screen time, reading through documents, manuals, research and email? Are you stuck at your desk all day and not moving around enough? Then Read & Write is for you. Get someone else to do the reading for you. Choose the voice that you want to hear. Press play and close your eyes for a bit. Record all your essential readings into an audio file and plan your day so you can listen to them while you go for a walk or hit that treadmill. Be more flexible with text help, Read & Write.

SALLY: All right. So I’m just going to stop the share for a second. Now, whilst more ads you see are there to sell you something, whether it benefits you or not, in all honesty I can say I have used Read & Write since we started working from home. I’ve found it has given me flexibility to get away from my desk but still remain productive. It is so easy to get stuck in a rut working from home to get distracted by who knows what and to lose motivation but thanks to Read & Write, my favourite alternate office this year has been my tree house. I can honestly say that I never expected to say that at the start of this year.

NATALIE: And, yes, I have spoken to Sally whilst she has been in her tree house. Okay. Now, we want to play one last video for you that showcases some of the value and impact of AT at Western this year.

SCOTT: Assistive technology or AT at Western is growing and we are very excited about this. We can see the benefit it has in so many situations, particularly as we move into a time of high dependence on digital technologies.

JAMES: Part of our success for Western comes down to the care for the individual. Whilst these are trying times we want to make sure that no-one gets left behind. That's why assistive technology at Western is for everyone, both staff and students.

SARAH: Without this program and without you guys educating me and showing me how to use it and then me being able to take it creatively and make it work for me, I would say hands down I would not have successfully got through this semester and I’m pretty sure I passed.

JACOB: For me the assistive technology I’ve been provided has been completely life changing. It has given me a way to study in my own environment, that works best for myself.

ELLEN: Assistive technology for all students means that Western is providing an inclusive environment where everyone has the opportunity to study what they need and want to study their way.

MICHELLE: It is the same for staff, having easy access to AT means that staff can adjust the way that they carry out their work based on their individual needs and preferences.

DARREN: I've been using AT to support everyday tasks, like writing emails, taking notes and listening to user manuals as I follow the instructions.

NOLA: It helps me to ensure that I comprehensively understand and identify priorities in the wide range and volume of material that I have to read.

JO: It’s given me the flexibility in my approaches to so many tasks and helped me become more efficient in a short space of time.

ALL: We love AT.

SALLY: So are we out of time, Debbie? Yep. We might stop.

DEBBIE: 20 minutes goes very fast. I'm very sorry to cut you off there. It was a fabulous presentation. Thank you very much and one of the things that I love was actually seeing some of the technology and work as well, so thank you. Thank you for that. That was great. And I also love with your expertise, you know, you could actually see how technology, you know, how you could think outside the box with all that technology to keep the students engaged because that was one of the main concerns this year was keeping students engaged in such a, you know, an unknown time, but also in turn, you know, making the whole campus and the whole university engaged as well. So not only helping the students but also assisting everybody else as well and making your lives a little bit easier, and I guess the one that I’m really excited about is the feedback from students. One of the things we want is students to engage with us to – we’re in this job because we want to see people succeed and do well, so having that great feedback and having that go out into the student community, we then will have more people engage with us, ensuring that they have a better learning experience. So Natalie and Sally, thank you very much for that wonderful presentation and I know that we have you on later this afternoon as well, so you’re welcome to have a nice little break now in preparation. So thank you to you both for that.