OfLA Project
2018-1-UK01-KA203-048090

O12 – Evaluation of the final cycle of studies:
NTU Calling Service Trial

RESPONSIBLE PARTNER:
NOTTINGHAM TRENT UNIVERSITY

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Output 012 – Evaluation of the final cycle of studies

These reports will map the process of data-informed advice in the final year of the study.

A1. We will confirm with the new study subjects how we will work alongside them. This time however, we will have selected a new group of courses or degree programs to work with, or will be testing a new approach to using institutional data/ learning analytics in the advising and supporting process. This may include group tutorials, different types of alert or early warning, or advising using a particular pedagogical methodology.

A2. We will monitor and project manage the operation of the learning analytics resources.

A3. We will map how data (on each course and/or centralized) is used to firstly spot students at risk, how students are communicated to and how they are supported. Importantly, this year the reports will also include a summary of how we communicated with staff to set up the new round of interventions and challenges associated with the new cycle of interventions.

A4. We will publish the resources to the website. UMCU will take overall responsibility for editing together the reports.

Contents

Please see '[O12 – Evaluation of the final year of studies: NTU Calling Service Trial Appendix]' for the appendices of this report.

1. Executive summary

This case study reports on the process evaluation of a calling service intervention that took place at Nottingham Trent University (NTU) between October and December 2020. Students that were identified as low engaged based on their interaction with the University were telephoned by a member of a dedicated call centre team. The phone call was a coaching style of conversation that signposted students to further support as appropriate.

During the time of this large-scale trial the University decided that there was enough evidence to expand the trial to all schools[1] in the following term. This evaluation informed process improvements that were implemented both during the time of this trial and that informed the expansion of the trial in the following term.

This report provides a detailed description of the call process, including improvements implemented during the trial as a result of this evaluation and those that were applied in the expansion of the trial. It reports upon findings of the evaluation with 100 participants that included students, callers, tutors, and the University's student support service[2].

The report recommends that a call centre approach is seen as one part of a multi-strategy approach to supporting less engaged students, alongside the continuing role of the personal tutor, particularly for ongoing student cases. It concludes with recommendations that are aimed at institutions that want to learn more about how to implement a call centre approach, including: early scoping of the project; preparation for the calls; communications with stakeholders; and key aspects of the call process. Relevant further details about this trial, including information about training and communications, can be found in the accompanying appendix[3].

2. Introduction and methodology

2.1 Background information

The OfLA project has tested interventions using a three stage model: prompts, communication and actions. This trial tests the stages 'communication' and 'action'. This case study describes a calling service intervention, referred to in this report as the 'Calling Service Trial', that took place between October and December 2020 and the evaluation that took place to inform the development of the intervention. This large-scale trial took place at Nottingham Trent University (NTU). NTU is one of the largest universities in the UK, with over 33,000 students, and more than 4,000 staff (Times Higher Education, n. d.). It is based in Nottingham, in the East Midlands region of the United Kingdom.

NTU has nine academic schools that may typically be called faculties in other Higher Education Institutions. The trial took place in four schools (approximately half of NTU's students) in which students that were identified as low engaged based on their interaction with the University were telephoned by a member of a dedicated call centre team. The prompt for action is the 'no

[1] NTU has nine academic schools that may typically be called faculties in other Higher Education Institutions.
[2] This is referred to as Student Support Services or SSS throughout this report.
[3] Please see 'O12 – Evaluation of the second cycle of studies: Calling Service Trial Appendix' for the appendices of this report.

engagement alert' (see Figure 1). The phone call was a coaching style of conversation that signposted students to further support as appropriate. During the time of this trial the University decided that there was enough evidence to expand the trial to the whole University in the following (Spring) term.

No-engagement alert
If a student does not interact with the University for 10 consecutive days during term time if they are a first year student, and 14 consecutive days[4] if they are a second or final year student (using the engagement measures listed below) an alert[5] is automatically generated by the Dashboard.

The Dashboard at NTU uses the already available electronic measures of: attendance, Library loans, Log-in to NOW (the University's Virtual Learning Environment), Accessing NOW Learning Rooms, Card swipes to NTU buildings, use of E-Resources, and coursework submissions (through the NOW dropbox. Using these measures, the Dashboard algorithm provides an engagement rating for each student for each day of the year based on their activity levels: the more a student engages with the resources the higher their engagement rating. The engagement rating can be one of five ratings: High (H), Good (G), Partial (P), Low (L), or Very Low (V). From September 2020, due to Covid-19, the two on campus measures (card swipes and library loans) were removed from the algorithm.

The no-engagement alert is the 'prompt' in the three-stage OfLA model: prompts, communication and actions.

Figure 1: No-engagement alert

The evaluation took place during the time of the trial, and ongoing findings were summarised and fed back to the Dashboard Team[6] throughout this time. This informed process improvements that were implemented both during the time of this trial and that informed the expansion of the trial in the Spring term. These process developments have been indicated in the green 'process developments' boxes throughout this report.

Sector context

The Calling Service Trial took place at Nottingham Trent University (NTU) in the first term of the academic year 2020/21. This is referred to as the Autumn term within this report. At the start of this Autumn term many students travelled to their university campus but due to a peak in Covid-19 cases some of these students were subsequently isolating in their halls of residence. There were also cases of students that were unable to travel to the UK to start their course because of Covid-19 restrictions. Teaching in this term began in the form of 'blended learning' in which students received a mixture of online and distanced in-person teaching, but due to lockdown restrictions this changed to fully online teaching during this term. On 5 November, England began its second national lockdown. The students were allowed to return home from 3 December during a 'travel window' for Christmas.

[4] For further information about how this timescale was decided see the OfLA 09 - The impact of reducing the alert time period from 14 to 10 days in the NTU Student Dashboard (OfLA 2020c).
[5] Prior to this call trial an email was sent automatically to the student's personal tutor to support tutors to identify students that may not be engaging with their studies. As discussed in this report, in this call trial the personal tutor and SSS were notified following an alert. In 2019/20 NTU also trialled sending an alert email directly to students' university email address in three schools within the University. This trial did not continue in 2020/21.
[6] Known within the University as the Student Engagement Team.

Sector research during this time has found that the mental health of young people was particularly affected during periods of lockdown. Research by the mental health charity, Mind, explored the experiences of mental health of young people during lockdown in the period April-June 2020 and found that nearly three quarters (73%) of university students in their sample said that their mental health declined during lockdown (Mind, 2020). There is also concern within the sector about the impact of digital poverty on students' learning during Covid-19, such as access to appropriate study space, a reliable internet connection, and a suitable electronic device such as a computer or laptop. Survey data reported by the Office for Students (OfS) from 1,416 students highlighted this divide, finding that for just over half of these students (52%), their learning was impacted by slow or unreliable internet connection (with 8% 'severely' affected), and 71% of students reporting lack of access to a quiet study space (with 22% 'severely' affected) (OfS, 2020). The digital divide is complex and is not only a divide of access but also skills and usage, and has been linked to other inequalities such as age, gender and ethnicity (van Dijk and Hacker, 2003). In light of this, Zheng and Walsham (2021) suggest that the term 'digital inequalities' is used to describe these multiple inequalities that may be magnified during Covid-19. We may therefore expect to see some student groups disproportionally affected by digital inequalities during the pandemic.

Research in the USA has identified that some student groups have been disproportionally affected by Covid-19. Research by the Student Experience in the Research University (SERU) Consortium survey with 1,788 students with at least one disability (physical, learning, neurodevelopmental, or cognitive) between May and July 2020 in nine universities in USA found that students with a disability were more likely to experience financial challenges, including an unexpected increase in technology expenses, as well as food and housing insecurity (Soria et al, 2020a). These students were also more likely to experience symptoms of anxiety and depression and were significantly less likely to agree that they feel like they belong on campus than students without disabilities. Similarly, research by Zhang et al. (2020) with 147 students in the USA between March and April 2020 found that students with disabilities had greater concerns about the change to online learning and were "also exposed to a variety of stressors from discrimination to financial concerns" (2020, p12). The SERU research also found that students who identify as Black, Indigenous, or people of colour (BIPOC students) were more likely than their white peers to have experienced financial challenges, including an unexpected increase in technology expenses, as well as food and housing insecurity (Soria et al, 2020b). These students also "experienced higher rates of clinically significant symptoms of generalized anxiety disorder and major depressive disorder compared to White students" (2020b, p15) and were less likely to feel that they belong on campus than their white peers.

It is worth noting that the learning experience of first year students at university had already been disrupted prior to starting university due to Covid-19. Many of the first year students had been unable to take their final exams prior to attending university, with decisions made about school closures and exam marking made at a national level which, as research by Day et al. reports, left young people "feeling side-lined" and with "a sense of injustice" (2020, p23). This report explored the experience of 70 young people (aged 14-18) in seven countries during lockdown and also identified inequalities in access to technology and internet connectivity that was impacting upon the students' education (Day et al., 2020).

The NTU Student Dashboard

The NTU Student Dashboard is a learning analytics resource designed to help students to manage their own learning and enable university staff to better support students. It does so by aggregating data about students' engagement with their studies and presenting it in an easy-to-use format. The

NTU Student Dashboard generates 'engagement' data for the student based on their interaction with the University. This data is used to inform support of students whilst at university, and students sign up to the University using their data as part of their enrolment conditions. Learning analytics offers advantages over other methods used to detect students at risk of early departure. Traditional methods, such as academic assessments, often generate early warnings too late to be used effectively and methods based on student background risk stereotyping, or even stigmatising, students for characteristics that they are unable to change. By using learning analytics, NTU is able to cost-effectively identify students at risk of early departure throughout the year.

The Dashboard is managed by a team within the Centre for Student and Community Engagement (CenSCE) and developed with the technology partners Solutionpath. The Dashboard won the award for Outstanding Student Support (THE 2014) and was cited extensively by the judges when NTU won University of the Year (THE, 2017). Previous research by the Dashboard Team has found that engagement data has a relationship with student progression and attainment at NTU so can be a useful indicator of a student that may be at risk of early departure: students with high engagement are more likely to progress and achieve higher grades than their peers with low engagement (Foster and Siddle, 2020). The Dashboard is operationally located in The Centre for Student and Community Engagement (CenSCE) within NTU, and this has been referred to as the 'department' from here onwards.

Ordinarily, the Dashboard at NTU uses the already available electronic measures of: attendance, Library loans, Log-in to NOW (the University's Virtual Learning Environment), Accessing NOW Learning Rooms, Card swipes to NTU buildings, use of E-Resources, and coursework submissions (through the NOW dropbox). Using these measures, the Dashboard algorithm provides an engagement rating for each student for each day of the year based on their activity levels: the more a student engages with the resources the higher their engagement rating. The engagement rating can be one of five ratings: High (H), Good (G), Partial (P), Low (L), or Very Low (V). From September 2020, due to Covid-19, the two on campus measures (card swipes and library loans) were removed from the algorithm. The Dashboard illustrates contextual information (such as entry qualifications) that may be useful to inform the support of the student but *does not* use this data within the algorithm: the algorithm uses behavioural data only. Staff access to the Dashboard is limited to those with authorised access, and students can access only their own Dashboard. For further details about the Dashboard see the NTU Student Dashboard Staff User Guide, the STELA Project Case Study Zero, and the NTU Student Dashboard – a brief explainer.

The Dashboard data is used in a number of different ways within the University to support students as illustrated in Figure 2 below. This report focuses on the support process that takes place following no engagement alerts generated by the Dashboard (in blue under '2. Supporting Students' below).

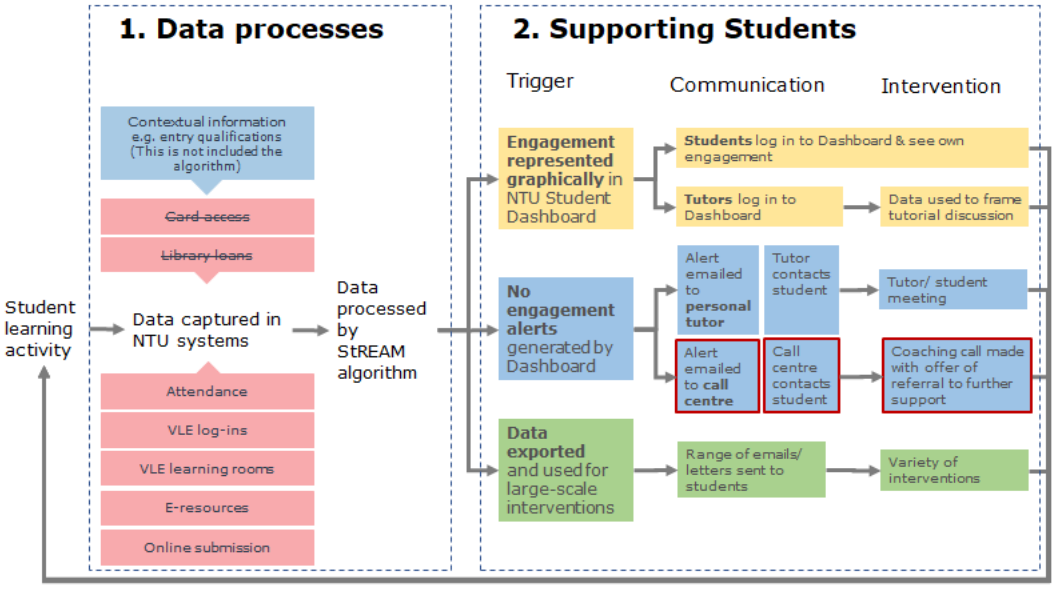

Figure 2: How Dashboard data is used to support students

The Calling Service Trial

The Calling Service Trial took place in four schools in which a dedicated call centre team telephoned students that had raised a no-engagement alert and offered a coaching style of conversation that signposted students to further support as appropriate. This is indicated in Figure 2 above in blue under '2. Supporting Students' with a red outline. In the remaining five schools the tutor (or academic mentor) continued to receive an alert email.
Figure 3 illustrates the calling service trial process.

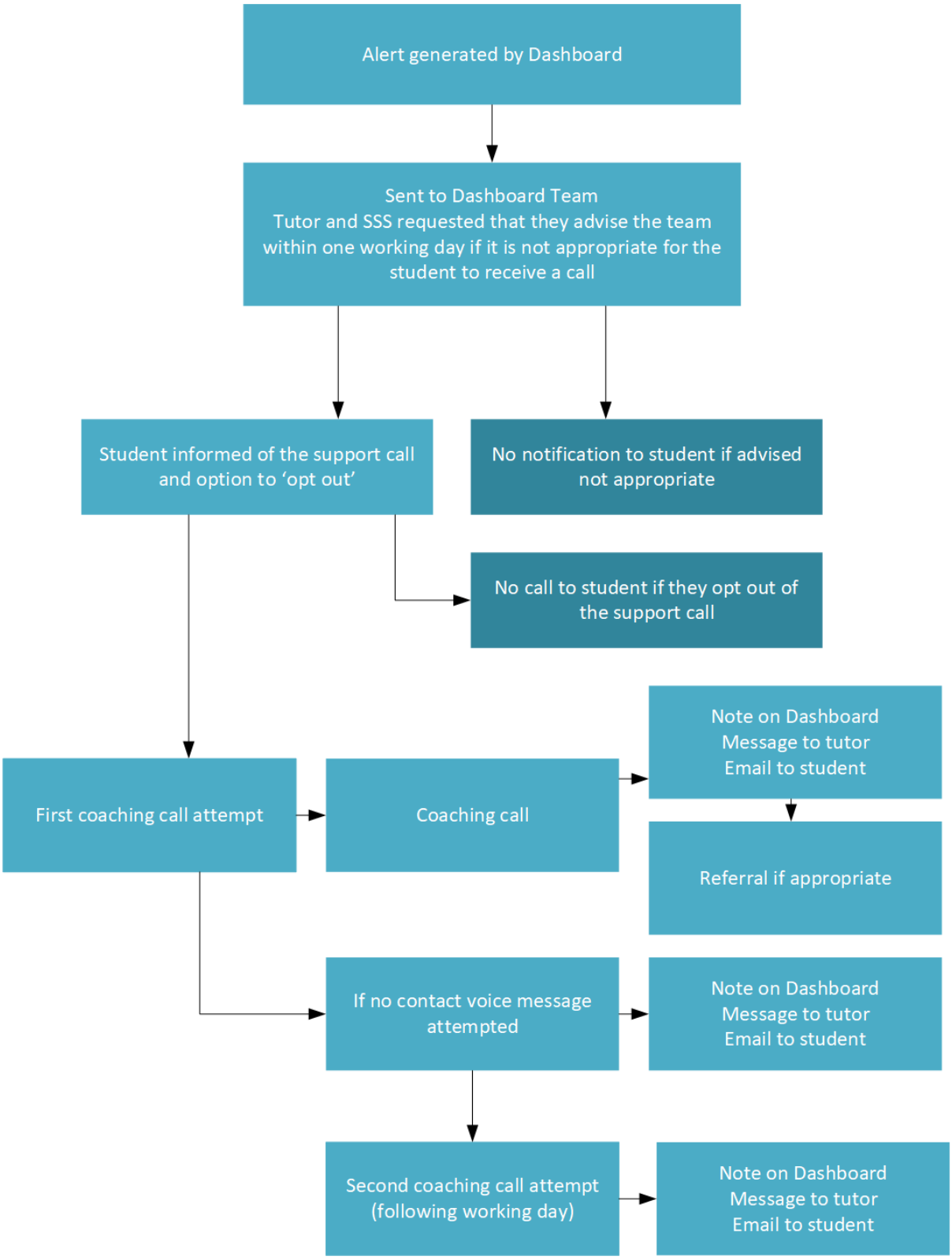

Figure 3: The calling service trial process

This trial built upon a previous successful call campaign that had taken place in the summer term 2020 in response to Covid-19 in which students with 'low' or 'very low' engagement had been

contacted by a call team[7]. This trial was also in response to findings from previous OfLA project research. The 09 NTU Staff Reflective Diaries Study (Ofla, 2020d) recommended "a developed call campaign, aimed at low engaged students, with the aim of encouraging re-engagement with study" (Recommendation 7). This was further supported with feedback from students in the 09 NTU Student Research Study (Ofla, 2020b) in which seven of the fourteen students interviewed stated that they would have liked to have been contacted by telephone following an alert.

Although all schools adhere to key personal tutoring principles[8], the model of personal tutoring varies between schools, and so students may have differing experiences of contact following an alert as was highlighted in the 09 NTU Student Research Study (Ofla, 2020b). This differing experience following an alert has made evaluation of the actions following an alert previously difficult to measure. The advantage of the Call Service Trial is that it will provides a consistent experience for students following an alert that will allow evaluation of subsequent action to take place.

The Calling Service Trial process

About the design of the trial

The Calling Service Trial was already in development at NTU but was disrupted due to Covid-19 and was designed to fit around the University's existing organisational processes. The processes involved in the trial are therefore more complex than they would be if the process had been designed independently of existing University processes. The trial involved ongoing collaboration with schools and with Student Support Services (SSS) and was conducted remotely with all staff working at home due to Covid-19 restrictions.

Managing the process

The trial was managed by the Dashboard Team. This involved: collaborating with schools and SSS; training and managing the callers; daily processing of alert data; recording and monitoring of calls; facilitating daily call meetings; and supporting the callers. Each school nominated a 'School Lead' that met regularly with a senior member of the Dashboard Team to give feedback on the trial and resolve any issues. The callers included two members of the Dashboard Team and ten volunteers from within the department. In November a student intern joined the call team. The need to employ the use of volunteer callers from within the department was due to the speed with which the call trial was set up in response to Covid-19, and many of these volunteers had taken part in the NTU COVID Summer Calling Campaign.

A spreadsheet was kept in Excel that recorded each stage of the process. This was managed by the Dashboard Team and updated daily following each stage of the process by the callers where appropriate (See Appendix 1 for details of information recorded in this spreadsheet).

The Dashboard Team received automatic alert data from the Dashboard at 10.30am each working day. This listed all students that had generated an alert for the four schools that were part of this trial. The team then prepared the spreadsheet ready for calls to take place each afternoon between 2pm and 5pm. At the beginning of each call session an online meeting facilitated by a member of the Dashboard Team took place in which callers were assigned students to call and any queries

[7] For further information about this previous call campaign please see O12 - NTU COVID Summer Calling Campaign (OfLA, 2021).

[8] The principles on which the personal tutoring model is based include "providing personalised academic, pastoral and professional advice and guidance and serving as a gateway to further specialist support" and supporting students' social and academic transition throughout the student lifecycle. See the Nottingham Trent University Quality Handbook Section 14: Learning and Teaching (NTU, 2018).

addressed. There were no targets set for the callers, who worked at their own pace. A debrief meeting also took place at the end of each call session that provided an opportunity to address caller queries and to informally talk about their experience of the calls that day. This also allowed for callers to feedback on process improvements and to gain support from the team if needed. Throughout each call session a member of the Dashboard Team was available to answer any questions that arose as a result of the calls.

Process developments:

- *During this term the time that the alert data was received from the Dashboard was changed from 10.30am to 8.30am to allow more time to process the data ready for the calls in the afternoon (for example amending students that can't be called based on feedback from tutors/SSS).*
- *Initially the meeting with callers at the start of the session were scheduled for 30 minutes and this was streamlined to fifteen minutes following more time to prepare the alert data in the morning.*

Prior to each student call

Feedback from the personal tutor[9] and SSS on whether a call is appropriate

Prior to calling each student, an important step in the process was to gain feedback on whether a call was appropriate for each individual student. When the Dashboard Team received automatic alert data from the Dashboard at 10.30am each working day, an email was also automatically sent to each student's personal tutor requesting that they advise the team within one working day if it is not appropriate for the student to receive a call. At the start of the trial, SSS were also informed about students that had generated alerts by automatically copying SSS into the individual student alert email. SSS were also requested to advise the team within one working day if it is not appropriate for the student to receive a call. Due to the volume of alerts at the start of the trial this communication with SSS was changed so that a spreadsheet of the student names were given to SSS which was a more efficient process.

Each school provided alternative contacts for the call team to contact regarding those students that may not yet have a tutor. This stage of the process was to ensure that a student would not get a call if it was felt to be inappropriate, for example, if the student was in hospital. This is regarded by SSS as more than an administrative task as it involves high level judgement because of the complexity of issues a student may be dealing with. This process was needed because the systems within the University currently do not link student records kept by SSS with the Dashboard. The SSS team can view the Dashboard if they have been granted relevant permission but the Dashboard Team cannot view the student records kept by SSS.

Process developments:

- *Initially, SSS were informed about students that had generated alerts by automatically copying SSS into the individual student alert email. Due to the volume of alerts at the start of the trial this was changed so that a spreadsheet of the student names was given to SSS which was a more efficient process.*
- *Following this trial, each school was asked to provide one contact only within each school as a contact for the call team regarding students that may not yet have a tutor.*

[9] Within the UK this type of role is commonly referred to as a 'personal tutor'; within continental Europe it may be referred to as 'study advisers', and within the US, 'academic advisers'. In one school at NTU, this role is referred to as an 'academic mentor'.

Informing the student of the call

The next step in the process was to inform the student of the call and to offer them an opportunity to 'opt out' of the call. The students for whom the call team had not received an email from their tutor or SSS to say that a call would not be appropriate were then contacted using their university email address to inform them that they would receive a support call from the University. This email informed students that the call is part of the package of support offered to NTU students and advised them that they can choose to 'opt out' of the call or to communicate via email if they prefer. This was addressed directly to each student using mail merge. Please see Appendix 2 for a copy of the email.

About the call

The students then received a phone call from the call team within three days[10] unless they had chosen to 'opt out' of the call. The call was a coaching style of conversation that aimed to provide a pathway to support for students where appropriate. The callers received coaching training and were provided with guidance documents including a call script (see Appendix 3 for a copy of the call script). Within the call, students were asked for their permission to both contact their tutor and to leave a note[11] on the Dashboard to say that a call had taken place. This communication with the tutor and note on the Dashboard did not contain specific details about the content of the call. If students did not answer the phone, a message was left using the appropriate message script where possible (see Appendix 4). The students that the call team had not been able to contact (including those students that had been left a voice message) were sent a follow up email signposting them to the University information pages (that includes guidance on where to seek a range of different support), and encouraging the student to make contact with their personal tutor. Please see Appendix 5 for a copy of the follow up email.

Following the call

Following each call, the caller updated the spreadsheet, including cases where the student did not answer the call, or the phone number was unavailable. The caller also completed a note on the Dashboard to say that a support call had taken place if permission from the student had been gained to do this, and sent the student and tutor an email that contained a summary of the call and the actions agreed. Where the student had not been contactable a note about this was also made on the Dashboard and the tutor informed. The following working day the call team would attempt a second call for those students that they hadn't been able to speak to. In this trial more than two attempted calls were made if this was considered appropriate, and this was decided on an individual basis.

The callers were provided with the following templates to use in these communications.
Communications to send to the student:

- Follow up email after a call
- Follow up email when there are no issues or actions
- Email for a student with incorrect contact number
- Student does not answer the second call

Communications to send to the tutor:

- Follow up email after a call
- When incorrect student mobile number
- When student has not been reached

[10] This was initially planned as the next day, but due to the unexpected volume of alerts early in the term this was sometimes within three days.

[11] The Dashboard allows for notes to be added that can be used to record discussions or agreed actions with the student. These are seen by both staff with relevant access to that student, and the student, and both can add comments to these notes. For further information please see the NTU Student Dashboard Staff User Guide.

Process developments:

- *The call script and the templates were developed and modified in response to the ongoing caller feedback throughout the term. Please see Appendix 5 for the templates.*
- *When this trial was continued in the Spring term, a team of seven full time callers were employed and trained specifically for the role.*

The following diagram (Figure 4) illustrates the process from the view of the daily tasks for the callers.

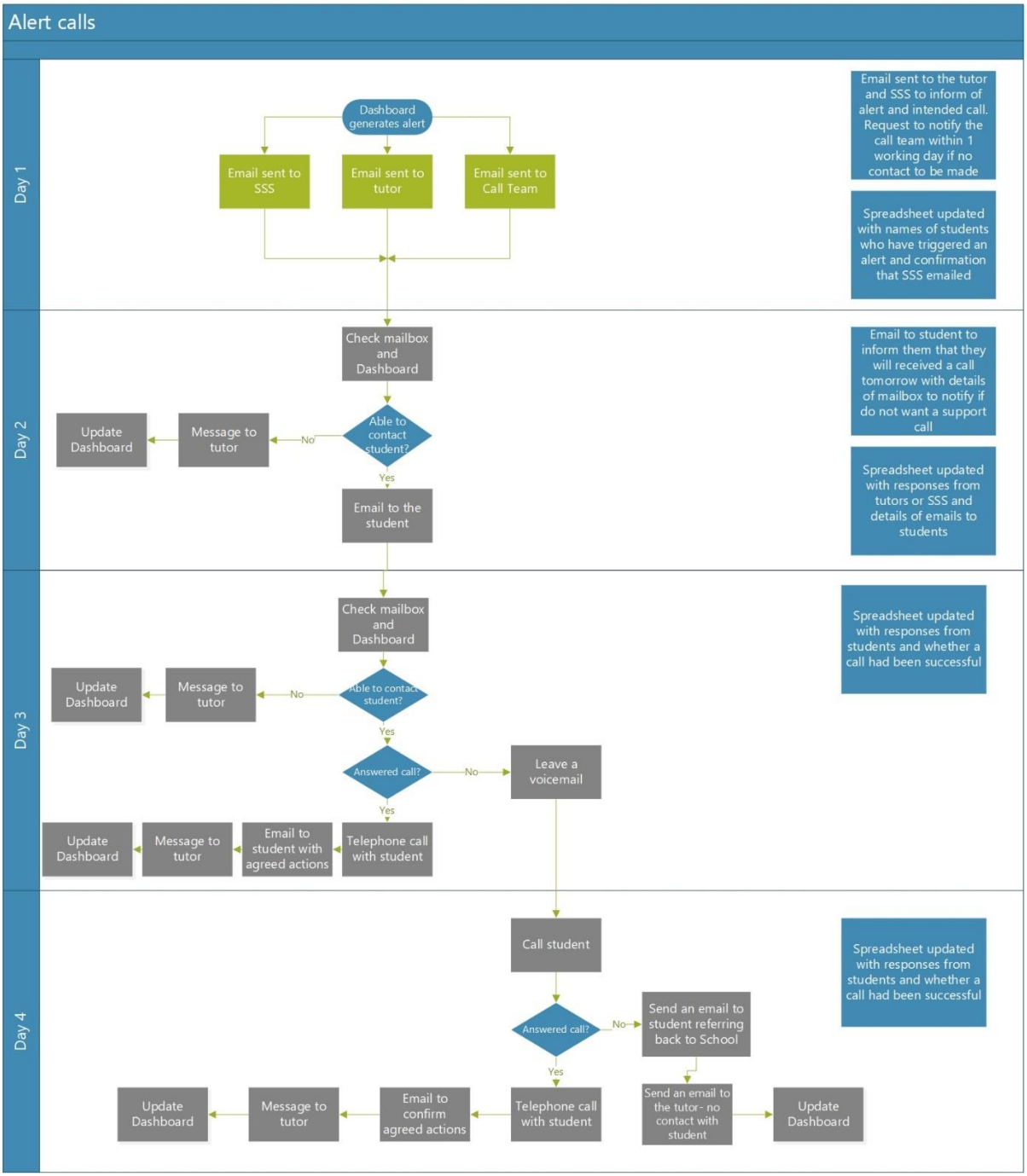

Figure 4: Daily caller tasks

Preparation for the trial
An email mailbox was set up that was specific to the call campaign, and all callers had access to this mailbox. A phone number was used that was specific to this trial that all callers used. This was set up with a 'no call back' function and an automated message asking students to leave a message and explaining that a member of the team would return their call (see Appendix 6).

The Dashboard Team and callers received training from SSS about safeguarding and responding to more serious problems that a student might be dealing with, including how to refer a student to SSS. The call team received training from the Dashboard Team which provided: an overview of the project; daily processes including using the spreadsheet and Dashboard use; and an introduction to the caller role and the coaching practice they will be using during the calls.

The callers were also provided with the following guidance documents:

- A guidance document that explains the purpose of the spreadsheet, what is contained in each column, and daily tasks associated with the spreadsheet (see Appendix 7).
- A call script. This includes variations of the script for: students that have not engaged since the start of the year; students that are disengaged; and students that are temporarily enrolled. This document also includes a list of sources of support that callers can refer students to, and a voice message script for callers if the student doesn't answer the call (Appendices 3 and 4).
- The daily caller tasks diagram (**Error! Reference source not found.**) together with a d ocument that listed the daily tasks for callers (see Appendix 8).
- An NTU referral document devised by SSS that contains emergency contacts (such as an immediate risk to the student) and non-emergency contacts (such as Health and Wellbeing, Finance and Fees).
- Student Support Services training materials.
- Templates required for the processing of calls. These were developed during this trial following feedback from callers (see Appendix 5).
- The NTU Dashboard Staff User Guide.

2.2 Research introduction and aims

The aim of this research was to conduct a process evaluation that would inform the development of the trial and further improvements. It aimed to explore: how students view and experience this intervention; to learn from the stakeholders involved about how the call service could be improved; to better understand the resource requirements; and whether there was enough evidence to expand the trial across the University.

This process evaluation[12] took place during the time of the trial and ongoing findings were summarised and fed back to Dashboard Team throughout this time. These findings have informed process developments for both this trial and the expansion of the trial in the Spring term, including

[12] A process evaluation aims to evaluate *why* a programme or intervention works (or not) and how it is delivered, including capturing unintended issues and outcomes (Fox, Grimm and Caldeira 2017). The Office for Students (OfS), the independent regulator of the higher education sector in England, has provided guidance about how higher education providers can strengthen their standards of evidence. This evaluation sits within the 'Type 1: Narrative' of the Office for Students (OfS) standards framework (OfS, n. d.). The independent charity TASO (Transforming Access and Student Outcomes in Higher Education) also provides evaluation guidance for the higher education sector. This study sits within the TASO 'Level 1:Monitor' impact evaluation (TASO, 2020).

improvements to the recording of data that will allow an impact evaluation of the Spring term call campaign to take place.

Process development:
Improvements were made to the recording of data in the Spring term that will enable impact evaluation to take place (see the changes to the spreadsheet columns in Appendix 1). The impact evaluation will assess the impact of the call on students' subsequent engagement.

2.3 Overview of methodology

A number of methods were used and a variety of stakeholders consulted to evaluate the call trial as summarised below. In addition to the 100 participants outlined in Table 1, informal feedback from School Leads was gained though regular meetings with a senior member of the Dashboard Team, and ongoing informal feedback gained from callers at the end of each call session.

Participants and evaluation method	Date	Number of participants
Tutors		
Survey 1	30 October–6 November 2020	12
Survey 1 (sent to a different sample of tutors)	26 November–2 December 2020	10
Survey 2	14 December 2020-January 2021	44
Callers		
Individual feedback interview	27 October–2 November 2020	5
Online focus group	26 October 2020	7
Online focus group	9 December 2020	9
Student Support Services		
Interview with senior SSS staff member	December 2020	1
Students		
Survey 1	4–19 November 2020	6
Survey 1 (sent to a different sample of students)	1-15 December 2020	6
Total		**100**

Table 1: Participants and evaluation method

3. Findings

The following section first summarises the call data and subsequent process improvements made. It then outlines research findings from each of the stakeholders: students, tutors, callers, and Student Support Services, focusing on what is working well followed by comments and recommendations for improvement.

3.1 Summary of call data

2,777 alerts were raised during this time, and callers managed to speak to, or leave a voice mail message for, 1,800 students. At the start of term there were higher number of alerts than in previous years and this is almost certainly due to Covid-19 and the resultant challenges for students (as discussed by callers in section 3.4). The early data issues identified were: falsely generated alerts (such as students on placement); personal tutors not yet showing on the Dashboard for some students; and students' phone number incorrectly recorded on the Dashboard (due to the student not updating their contact details with the University). In response, a number of process developments were implemented as described in the 'process developments' box below.

It was expected that there would be a number of students that would be unable to be contacted as this had been identified in the OfLA O4 – Literature review: tutoring/study advising. This literature review describes work by Smith et al, 2012, who found that two thirds of the calls they made led to either non-direct (e.g. voicemail) or no (e.g. wrong number, no response) contact. However Smith et al (2012) did find that those contacted directly were more successful, and this will be evaluated as a possible outcome in further impact evaluation of this call trial[13]. In addition, we see in the feedback from tutors in this study that there were also students who responded to the call that *hadn't* previously responded to email contact (see section 3.3).

It may also be the case that the attempt at contact and resultant processes have had a positive impact on students even when no contact was made. Students, for example, may have updated their contact details and therefore were more able to be contacted by their tutor, and students may have followed up the links to support in the emails. Evaluation in this case would be difficult to measure and is outside the scope of this study.

Process developments

- *Prior to the Spring term's calls, Schools informed the Dashboard Team which courses they would like to be part of the call trial to reduce the number of falsely generated alerts (such as courses on placement).*
- *Students with an incorrect phone number were individually sent an email from the call team asking them to update their contact details (see Appendix 5 for the email template) and Schools promoted the importance of keeping their details up to date to students[14].*
- *School Leads promoted the importance of updating the tutor record within the School (in order for the students' tutor to be shown on the Dashboard).*
- *At the Schools' request, a weekly report of those students that were generating repeat alerts was provided for the Schools.*

[13] This will be reported upon in future work by the Dashboard Team and will reference OfLA in this work.

[14] In one School, for example, a message was sent to all students requesting that they update their telephone numbers.

3.2 Student research

119 of the NTU students that had responded to a phone call prior to 3 November 2020 were invited by email to complete a survey[15] to give feedback on their experience of the calls. The same survey was sent to a different sample of 84 students that had received a phone call between 4-27 November. Twelve students completed the survey in total, and this low response rate was expected due to the current difficult Covid-19 situation and that students prioritised for contact were less likely to be engaging with the university (see Appendix 9 for a copy of the student survey).

What is working well?

The majority of students who responded to the survey appreciated the call, and the calls resulted in a positive change in behaviour for over half of the students.

Positive feedback and changes in behaviour

Overall the comments about the calls were very positive with students advising to "*keep going*" with the calls and that the calls are "*pretty good already*":

> *"The call was great and everything I needed".*

The calls resulted in a change in behaviour for over half of the students. Seven students said that they changed their behaviour as a result of the call, and this included both study behaviour such as responding to emails, and how they felt about their work.

> *"[I] started studying again and signed in more often to my NOW to finish my assignments*",

One student said, for example, that they felt "*more motivated to engage*" and another, that they "*stopped worrying about my work, knowing I'd be able to catch up*".

Students with little or no contact with tutors appreciated the call

The qualitative responses suggest that it is perhaps students that either do not have a personal tutor, or who may have had less contact with their personal tutor, that may particularly benefit from such a support call, both in their re-engagement with their studies but also to feel that they belong to the University. There were two students who said in the survey that they had not got a personal tutor. One of these students said that they also didn't feel able to talk to anyone on their course if they had any questions or concerns. This student 'strongly agreed' that they appreciated the call from NTU, and as a result of the call felt "*more relaxed about university*" and said that it "*made me less anxious*". They changed their behaviour "*to some extent*" said they were "*more motivated to engage*". The other student who said that they had not got a tutor also 'strongly agreed' that they appreciated the call from NTU, and said that the call "…*made me feel protected and considered as a member of the NTU community*". They changed their behaviour "*to some extent*", explaining "*I responded to my emails and signed in more often to my NOW to finish my assignments*". There was also one student who had not yet met their tutor (although the student said that their tutor had helped them with questions or concerns that they have had). This student also 'strongly agreed' with the statement 'I appreciated the call from NTU', saying that the call made them feel "*part of the*

[15] NTU's Market Research and Insights team set up and sent this survey to students on behalf of the Dashboard Team. This survey drew upon questions that were used for the analysis of the NTU COVID Summer Calling Campaign. There were a number of students that had received more than one phone call, and several students were not included in the sample. Students were not included in the sample if they were in the process of leaving the University or had withdrawn, or those that it was decided that it would be not be appropriate such as a student who was 'signed off' work and those with serious medical issues.

uni". They changed their behaviour "*to a large extent*" as they now "*knew how to catch up on late work*".

During this research, the callers also fed back instances of some students that didn't feel comfortable talking to their tutor, and in these cases they were referred to other members of staff on their course that they can talk to. Although difficult to measure, it may be that these students are more likely to benefit from a telephone support call, and this is worthy of further exploration.

Comments and recommendations

The students recommended that the calls are **supportive in tone and include signposting to further support**:

> *"Just be aware that students may be struggling, so how I was approached, make sure every student is approached in a similar manner".*
>
> *"Make it clear all the support offered".*
>
> *"Try and signpost whenever possible to extra support that's available".*

The students also recommended that **callers are aware of mental health needs and support.** One student explained that transitions to the next year can increase anxiety for those with mental health problems. This student advised that the callers should *"ask students how they are coping mentally especially in this pandemic".* Another student advised:

> *"Make sure [the] first priority is to understand why students have not been engaging and be mindful of the pandemic".*

One student recommended that there should be more communication between staff members because, as they explained "*…a lot of what was discussed I have already told members of the NTU team".* How much information to share following calls was also raised by tutors (section 3.3). Only general information about the call was shared on the Dashboard and with the tutor following permission from the student, and this was to adhere to relevant information sharing policies.

A student also said that they would like *"a follow up call"* and another recommended that more specific times of the call are given "*so they aren't missed".* If resources allow therefore, an improvement to such a call trial would be to offer students more **specific times for the call**, and the **option of a follow up call**.

3.3 Tutor research

There were two surveys that were used to gain anonymous feedback from tutors.

Survey 1 was sent to randomly sampled staff who were a tutor, academic mentor, or nominated contact person, for a student who had generated a Dashboard alert during the time of the trial. Survey 1 was sent to 41 tutors on 30 October 2020, and to 47 *different* tutors on 1 December 2020. 22 tutors completed the survey: a 25% response rate[16]. This survey asked tutors what we can learn

[16] Three of the tutors that responded to this survey were no longer based in the schools that were taking part in this trial so their responses are not included in this report, however their responses have been fed back to the Dashboard Team.

from their experience of taking part in the trial: both what is working well and what can be improved. It also asked tutors about further contact they may have had with the students and the types of issues that students were experiencing.

Survey 2 was also sent to all staff who were a tutor, academic mentor, or nominated contact person, for a student who had generated a Dashboard alert during the time of the trial apart from those staff that had already been invited to complete Survey 1. Survey 2 was sent to 230 tutors on 14 December 2020 and 44 tutors completed the survey: a 19% response rate. Survey 2 asked tutors about their role as well as their experience of the trial and recommendations for improvement. Please see Appendix 10 for copies of Tutor Survey 1 and 2.

In addition to these findings from tutors, feedback from the School Leads on the process was positive, and they appreciated the calls being made. The Schools considered how this work fits with their own School processes such as the 'mid-term review' process[17], and engagement and attendance policies, particularly for those students that generate repeat alerts.

Summary of tutor research findings

The findings from the two tutor surveys have been combined in this summary.

Understanding the students' issues

The tutors in Survey 1 were asked to think about a typical example of a student that had generated an alert call and to tell us about that particular student. Tutors were asked to describe the nature of that student's issue from the choices given in Table 3. There were 19 tutors that answered this question, and almost half of these 19 students had presented with more than one issue. The following table illustrates issues identified by the tutors:

Type of issue	Number of students
Academic (struggling to cope, understanding feedback etc)	7
Problems with IT (eg lack of computer, wifi)	6
Covid-19 or other illnesses	6
Mental health/anxiety	4
Personal problems eg finance, family	3
Choice of course/studying not as expected	1
Organisation (for example, problems travelling to the UK, completing enrolment)	1
Problems with accommodation	1
Other: *"non attendance of seminar sessions"*	1
Other": "*a student who was attending sessions but didn't know that they needed to engage with the materials".*	1

Table 2: Student issues identified by tutors (Survey 1)

[17] The 'mid-term review' is a process by which Schools identify students for subsequent action using a combination of Dashboard data and tutor knowledge about the student. See 'O9 – Evaluation of the second cycle of studies: NTU Mid-term reviews' for further information (OfLA, 2020a).

It is worth noting that the students' issues were not always resolved by the call. Three tutors said the student's case was resolved, eight tutors said that it was ongoing, and eight that they didn't know the outcome.

Understanding the tutor role and changes due to Covid-19

The 44 tutors that completed Survey 2 were responsible for 1670 students: the average number of students a tutor was responsible for was 38 students. The majority (57%) of these tutors had spent between one and five hours supporting students in their role as tutor during the first term, 27% had spent between six and ten hours, 9% between 16 and 20 hours and one tutor had spent less than one hour on supporting students.

The majority of the tutors (63.7%) had seen an increase in the amount of time spent in their role as a tutor compared to this time last year[18], and only 4.6% (2 members of staff) had seen a decrease in their time spent in their role as a tutor.

This increase in the tutors' time spent supporting students was primarily due to Covid-19 which had resulted in both increased communication with students and a change in teaching delivery. Tutors described that their increased communications with students were primarily offering pastoral support (dealing with issues such as wellbeing, anxiety, mental health), Covid-19 related issues (such as self-isolation), and difficulties with the transition to online learning as these tutor quotes illustrate:

> *"The pandemic has increased the need for support".*
>
> *"Support re mental health during Covid, and problems with technology".*
>
> *"Significant increase in students with access statements, accessibility/disability and students who have experienced mental health difficulties, resulting in a large number of referrals and conversations with parents".*

The change to firstly blended teaching and then fully online teaching resulted in an increased workload for the tutors, many of whom are also members of teaching staff. The blended learning model resulted in more delivery (for example, where a cohort was split due to teaching smaller face to face groups), and when classes were fully online, students were more likely to email the tutor more frequently and expect more online contact. These tutors explain why their workload increased compared to last year:

> *"Students sent more emails than usual, probably due to lack of face to face interactions".*
>
> *"Students wanting to discuss their concerns, students enjoying the one-to-one contact, to discuss problems personal and course related".*

Tutors also described that they had spent an increased amount of time monitoring and responding to low attending and low engaging students, even with taking part in the call trial, due to the increased difficulties students face:

> *"I think not having to personally email non-engaging students helped[19]. However, students this year seem to be unusually needy".*

[18] 36.4% have seen a large increase and 27.3% have seen a slight increase

[19] This was due to taking part in the trial: the call team responded to the no engagement alert by offering students a phone call.

As this tutor describes, the monitoring of low engaged students was felt to be particularly important at this time:

> *"The current Covid circumstances means I have a heightened concern about student wellbeing, and those who don't respond to email concern me greatly".*

Tutor feedback on the trial

When the tutors were asked to what extent they agreed with the following statement (in Tutor Survey 1) the responses were as follows:

It is useful for me as a tutor/academic mentor* for the student to be phoned by a central team when it has been identified that they may not be engaging with their studies (*or nominated contact person).	
Definitely agree	15
Agree	2
Neither agree nor disagree	1
Disagree	1
Definitely disagree	0

The tutor who disagreed with this statement was unaware that callers record the call on the Student Dashboard and the process for the ongoing case management of the student. This highlighted the importance of Dashboard training for tutors and clear guidelines about the process for students that generate multiple alerts (see Appendix 12 for guidance sent to tutors about the call campaign in the Spring term).

What is working well?

The overall tutor feedback on the call trial was that a central call team provides a **systematic, informed, and consistent approach that "ensures all students will be contacted":**

> *"I think having a systematic approach to contacting students is useful, especially in term one and during Covid".*

> "*Central team may be more specialist/equipped to deal with issues".*

The tutors also felt that **the calls send a message to students that the University is concerned about students and their engagement**:

> *"The calls to students are good - showing students that we notice and care".*

This tutor commented that the students had also benefitted from the trial:

> *"Students being contacted promptly has had a positive and motivating response from students. They have seen the contact as supportive".*

In both surveys, the most commonly cited benefit of the call campaign was that it provided extra help to contact students, that this was a **shared responsibility**, and provided a **"*safety net*"** for students:

> *"I think it is a good scheme as it helps me feel that there is a 'safety net' there for students".*

Although tutor workload had increased overall, tutors described that **less time was spent on administration and more time focusing on student welfare**:

"I think this was helpful for streamlining the administration so you can focus on helping the students".

"As students have been contacted directly by Student Engagement I have been able to follow up, support and complement this".

Here, tutors referred to a reduction in administration in terms of responding to the initial alert, as this was initiated by the call team. Several tutors also reported that taking part in the trial had helped to **identify false engagement alerts** such as where a student was on placement so they are still enrolled but their engagement will appear low. It had also identified **instances of incorrect or missing information** on the Dashboard. Whilst this was seen as a positive outcome because it enabled these issues to be addressed, this did lead to more administration in these cases for the tutors as they dealt with these issues.

Tutors also said that taking part in the trial had acted as **a useful prompt to follow up on non-engaging students**, and that the trial had **enabled earlier identification of student issues**. These tutors, for example, responded to the question 'Can you tell us about any benefits that you or your students have experienced as a result of taking part in the trial?' with the following responses:

"A useful alert to prompt timely intervention when necessary".

"Early interventions and referrals".

"Has enabled earlier conversations"'.

As these quotes illustrate, there were a few instances where tutors described **how the call team had managed to gain a response from students when a tutor hadn't been able to**:

"A student who I had not managed to make contact with was supported and put in contact with SSS which was great".

"In the past I have not had much luck getting in touch with students after a Dashboard alert, and to know that they have spoken to someone is great".

"Calling was useful as students reacted to the calls".

"I had emailed the student but received no reply, however once he had chatted to the Student Engagement Team he contacted me to discuss a way forward so it definitely helped. I think the process worked really well".

Whilst it appears that some students responded to the calls when they hadn't responded to emails, there were **also students that did not respond to the calls** (as seen in section 3.1) and this was also reflected in some of the tutors comments:

"None of my students answer the phone when they were contacted. Emails work better".

However, the call trial, as seen above, did offer this sense of 'shared responsibility' of contacting the students, and as this tutor says it was useful to see which students were not responding to the calls:

"It's been useful for me to see which students are being contacted and not responding".

Comments and recommendations

Process and clarity for ongoing student cases

This evaluation found that students' issues weren't necessarily resolved by one call, and that students often had a number of issues that they were facing. There were also a number of students that generated multiple no engagement alerts, and students that continued to be uncontactable. This highlighted the need for clarity about the ongoing process of supporting students that continue to disengage and the responsibility of the callers, tutors, and SSS in such ongoing cases. It also reaffirms the need for the continuing role of the tutor.

> *"Clarity needed, or a process needed, on what happens to those students being repeatedly contacted by yourself and myself, but not responding to either, or engaging in studies".*
>
> *"We need to be very clear about the role of the tutor, the role of the call centre, and the role of Student Support Services along the length of each student as a 'case'".*

Clarity about sharing of information

Tutors also asked for further clarity about how much they can report on the Student Dashboard about a student, as this tutor describes:

> *"I'm a little unclear about the student consent issue re making a [Dashboard] note… I'm not sure if and how much to report".*

This contributed towards the training recommendation that guidelines need to include the amount of information about a student that will be shared between the call team, tutors, and student support services. It also needs to include relevant data sharing legislation and ethics that will be adhered to (Appendix 14). See also the recommendation below (section 4.2) that consideration needs to be given to relevant data sharing legislation and ethics.

In response to this feedback the roles and responsibilities in ongoing student cases were clearly outlined and communicated as described in the 'process development' below.

Process developments:

- *When this trial was continued in the subsequent term the student case was referred back to the School following two attempted calls unless the call team was requested to continue the calls by the School. In the case of referral back to the School following two attempted calls, the personal tutor and the School contact were informed. This process was clearly communicated to the Schools, such as through the guidelines document provided for School Leads to disseminate to personal tutors (Appendix 12).*

3.4 Caller research

An online focus group was held at both the beginning and end of the term to explore with callers their experience of the trial, their views about what is working well, and areas for improvement. This was in addition to five short interviews with callers that focused on understanding time spent on the process by callers, and ongoing informal feedback given by callers at the end of each daily call session (see Appendix 11 for focus group and interview questions).

The majority of the caller time was spent completing the necessary processes before and after the calls such as preparing for the call, updating the spreadsheet, the subsequent email communications with the tutor and student, and putting a note on the Dashboard. This was the case even in cases where students did not answer the calls or where there was no phone number as these processes

were still completed in these cases. Where callers spoke to students, the calls typically lasted approximately five minutes, but there were also calls that lasted 30-45 minutes and these were seen as the most important calls by the callers, and the most rewarding.

> *"For every 10 or 15 voice mails you get you get at least one if not many more per session that are grateful. They [the student] know they need the help but they don't know where to go for it".*

> *"I came away from the session feeling really positive because I felt like even though I spoke to three students for a long time each, I felt that I had actually got through to them individually… it felt that each one was beneficial to the student".*

Each caller could share **individual success stories** of students that they had spoken to during this trial and reflected that sometimes the most challenging calls (where for example a student was in distress) were the most rewarding. The callers felt that **the calls were important to send a message to students that they were being noticed and helped to direct students to appropriate support**:

> *"There was a sense from some students that they didn't know who to contact and were grateful that we had noticed them".*

> *"It felt that students were genuinely appreciative of the call to know the right course of action for them to solve their issue".*

Several callers also spoke about instances where they **acted as a bridge between the student and the tutor**, and that students were grateful that the caller would notify their tutor after the call.

> *"I found that when I acknowledged to students that I will follow up with an email to their tutor (especially when they don't know their tutor) they were grateful we were contacting them".*

> *"They seemed pleased that we could make that first step… that we would let their tutor know".*

> *"A student who hadn't wanted to speak to anybody was so relieved that we would act as a gateway to their tutor. They said they felt a lot lighter after the call".*

There were also a few cases of students that had personal issues that they did not want to share with their tutor. These students were happy to talk to the caller about their issues and to be referred directly to Student Support Services. These caller reflections support the student findings (section 3.2), that it is perhaps students that either do not have a personal tutor, or who may have had less contact with their personal tutor, that may particularly benefit from such a support call.

Throughout the term, common issues that students were describing to the callers were: difficulties with access to Wi-Fi or equipment (such as a computer or laptop); financial concerns, and a minority of students with immediate support needs such as students who had recently suffered a family bereavement due to Covid-19. The callers reflected that there were also some differences in student issues at the beginning and end of the term. At the start of the term, common issues were also: students needing help completing enrolment; international students needing help with paperwork and visa applications; students unable to travel to the UK to study; students with Covid-19 or who were in isolation due to Covid-19; students who were adjusting to learning to study online; and instances where students had attended sessions but this was not registered in the session (and therefore it appeared that the student was low engaged). At the end of term, common issues were also: motivation; difficulties due to the length of time spent doing online learning only; and students

feeling anxious and isolated. There were also a number of students that reported that they were fine and had no issues or concerns.

As part of the coaching process, students were encouraged to reflect on actions that they could take (such as contacting their tutor or the Library) to support their engagement. There was recognition by the callers that students may choose not to act on the call and spoke about the line between their responsibility as a caller, and the responsibility of the student.

What is working well?

Ongoing feedback from callers to inform improvements and training

The ongoing feedback from callers was particularly useful to inform the development of caller resources in response to issues raised by students such the addition of a script for temporarily enrolled students and a template email for students with no issues or actions. There was also specific feedback from the callers about what worked well throughout the call process (such as preparation prior to calls and techniques that helped to engage students), and recommendations for improvement for the training (such as additional scripts) and these have been included in detail in the training recommendations (Appendix 14).

Flexibility to personalise the email templates

Callers reported that the email templates saved time and were important to ensure a consistent response to the students. However, callers also highlighted that in some cases it was particularly important to tailor these to reflect the conversation and to continue the connection they had made with the student, and that it worked well to have the flexibility to do this.

> *"A difficult call needs time to reflect the conversation in the [follow up email] communication. It is right that we spend the time translating the tone of the conversation in the email, but it takes time".*

Caller support

The callers highlighted the importance of being able to ask questions at the meetings at the beginning and end of each session, as well as throughout the call session if needed, and that they felt supported by this. This was seen to be particularly important due to the complex nature of some of the students' issues raised during the calls, and because the callers were all working remotely.

> *"I feel like I can do calls successfully because I can ask questions".*

> *"I felt fabulously well supported, particularly the first time as I was unsure about process".*

> *"Students have such individual circumstances I think it is helpful to have someone there to answer our caller questions".*

Callers reflected that after these longer and more complex calls that it was helpful to take some time before calling the next student:

> *"When you do have a call that it is quite emotional, it is quite difficult, and I just need a couple of minutes to gather my thoughts again before making another call".*

Comments and recommendations

One contact per school

Schools had provided more than one named member of staff as a contact in cases where the student did not yet have a tutor. As well as adding administration time to callers to find the appropriate contact, it also raised difficulties where staff members changed within Schools as it became a longer process to find out who to contact in such cases. As a result, in the Spring term, Schools were asked to provide only one named contact member of staff.

Process development:
In the Spring term Schools were asked to provide only one named contact member of staff per School.

Further potential to streamline the communication process

The callers reflected that a possible future development that would save administration time would be for the note that was made on the Dashboard following a call to be sent using an automated email to both the student and the tutor, rather than this being done by the caller. However, as discussed above, it was felt that it was essential to have the flexibility to tailor such communications where appropriate.

> *"I now see emails add an extension of the support that we offer… having a one size fits all automatic email might not always work – I feel like the real benefit is speaking to students as individuals and having a tailored email if they need it afterwards".*

The callers also highlighted that the current recording of students on the spreadsheet is suitable for a trial such as this, but long-term a more robust system of recording student cases is needed such as a Customer Relationship Management (CRM) system and this is discussed further in the following section (3.5) and the recommendations (4.2).

3.5 Student Support Services

A senior member of Student Support Services (SSS) was interviewed at the end of the trial period (December 2020) and asked for their views about what is working well about the trial and what can be improved, particularly when the trial is expanded across the University. They were also asked to give advice for institutions that would like to implement a similar trial and these have been incorporated into the overall recommendations (see Appendix 13 for the interview questions).

It was reported that there has been a change in the type of referrals to Student Support Services than in previous years with students displaying more complex support needs that require higher level support, and it was believed that this was due to Covid-19. Although there was not a large increase in the number of referrals, referrals required more urgent intervention.

What is working well?

The senior SSS staff member identified a number of areas that they believed the call centre to be working well.

Feedback from the personal tutor and SSS on whether a call is appropriate.

As discussed in section 2.1, SSS advised the Dashboard Team within one working day if it was not appropriate for the student to receive a call from the call team. Although this was time consuming it

was felt by SSS that this was an important step in this process because a student may not disclose contact that they have had with SSS to their personal tutor (and this was also reported by callers see section 3.4). It also required high level judgement because of the complexity of issues a student may be dealing with, and therefore this was done by a senior member of staff.

"It creates work – but it is work that is worth doing".

Earlier identification of students through call centre referrals.

Although data on referrals from the call centre is not yet collected[20] it was thought that the call trial had enabled earlier identification of students through referrals by the call team who, following the training from SSS, have known when to signpost a student to SSS. This supports the feedback from tutors, that the call trial had resulted in earlier identification and referrals of students. It was also thought that there were referrals that were being made to SSS through the call team that may not otherwise have occurred.

Students that were finding online learning difficult may have been more likely to have answered calls.

Students with a disability appeared to be finding the transition to online learning particularly difficult. It is thought that these students may have been more likely to have answered the calls to the call team rather than contact their tutor because during this time contact with the tutor was also online.

Re-engagement with students via practitioner contact.

In cases where it was not appropriate for the student to receive a call from the call team, and only where appropriate (such as where there had been recent contact by the student with the practitioner), practitioners sent students a 'check-in' email that in some cases resulted in re-engagement with SSS.

Producing insightful data to proactively support students.

An unintended outcome for SSS is that it has provided data that can be used to better understand and pro-actively support students, although this needs time and resources. The trial has raised the profile of attendance and engagement within SSS which, reports the senior member of staff, *"has been very positive and has enabled conversations around that within the team".* As a consequence, SSS staff have been engaging with the Dashboard, and although this takes time, it is felt that this has **enabled practitioners to gain a more complete view of the student** to better understand the students that they support. SSS also reported that an additional unexpected outcome of the trial is that they can **see patterns in the types of student that are more likely to generate alerts** that is informing their work, such as students with a disability that are finding accessing online materials difficult during lockdown. It is thought that there is potential here for further use of the data to support students as discussed below.

"It has been good in ways I didn't anticipate…it has created knowledge that I didn't have"

Comments and recommendations

Joining up of systems

It is recommended that a longer term improvement would be to implement a Customer Relationship Management (CRM) system in which a students' interaction with SSS could be viewed alongside

[20] Currently a record is kept of which referrals are made by academic staff and which are made through the Dashboard.

their engagement as shown on the Dashboard to facilitate understanding of the whole student in order to inform support. This would also provide a more long-term and robust system for the recording of interventions, particularly for ongoing student cases as was also recommended by callers (section 3.4).

Further potential of the data

SSS highlighted that there is further potential to use the data to inform the support of students. A record kept of referrals made by the call team will enable a comparison of students referred by the call centre with referrals from elsewhere within the University to identify whether the call centre is effective in directing students to appropriate support within SSS.

The data can also be used to understand patterns in the types of students that trigger an alert to inform pro-active interventions by SSS. This would require exploring patterns in the data between those students that generate an alert and students that have had previous contact with SSS. Understanding this data, particularly those students that are triggering repeat alerts, has the potential to inform pro-active interventions with these students. This will require additional data collection and consideration of ethics and student permissions required to do this. As using learning analytics data to support wellbeing is a relatively new use of such data, there are currently recommendations for wellbeing ethics being developed within the sector such as work by Ahern (2020) and Jisc (2020).

4. Discussion and recommendations

4.1 Discussion of main findings

Reflecting sector research, this large-scale trial at NTU has found that students experienced a number of challenges during this period of studying during Covid-19, such as the transition to online learning, access to Wifi and/or technology equipment, financial difficulties, anxiety, and personal issues. Again reflecting sector research, feedback from SSS was that students with a disability appeared to be disproportionally affected by online learning. This analysis has not explored whether there has been a disproportional affect on Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) students, but this may be worthy of further analysis given the findings of research by Soria et al. (2020b).

This trial has provided a consistent working practice following an alert as recommended in the OfLA 09 'NTU student research' report (2020b[21]) in that the call centre attempted to make a call to all students that had generated an alert (although not all students answered, and not all students had provided a correct contact number). This study found that some students responded to this that hadn't responded to previous communications from their tutor. The findings suggest that it may be that students who have had less contact with their tutor, and those that are finding online learning particularly difficult that may have been more likely to benefit from the call, both in their re-engagement with their studies but also to feel that they belong to the University. There were, however, also students that didn't respond to the call. It may be that these students benefited from receiving the support email following the attempted call, subsequent updates to tutor information on the Dashboard system, tutor awareness of the alert, and the reminder to the student to update their contact details, but this has not been evaluated in this study.

[21] Recommendation 4.2.4.

These findings then, reflect findings from the OfLA 09 'NTU student research' that found that different students responded to different communication types (OfLA, 2020b). It is recommended then, that **a call centre approach is seen as one part of a multi-strategy approach to supporting less engaged students**, **alongside the continuing role of the personal tutor, particularly for ongoing student cases.** A call centre approach can support the role for the tutor, as has been found here, by providing more time for tutors to focus on welfare of the student.

This evaluation has enabled us to refine recording of data to facilitate effective impact evaluation of the calls that took place in the Spring term (section 2.2). The project team will disseminate these findings and will reference OfLA on this work.

4.2 Recommendations

These recommendations are aimed at institutions that want to learn more about how to implement a call centre approach.

Early scoping of the project needs to:

- Communicate clear objectives of the purpose of the intervention and measures of success to all relevant stakeholders.
- Consider how the call centre will complement, work alongside, or replace existing structures. What are the restrictions in place as a consequence of what is already in place in the organisation?
- Consult and collaborate with key stakeholders such as faculty leaders, tutors, and relevant student support services where appropriate.
- Involve IT infrastructure teams to inform efficient processes such as making and monitoring of calls.
- Ensure adequate resources are available. The resource calculation needs to include:
    - Management: design of the call process (including writing templates and scripts); ongoing communications to all stakeholders; communications to students prior to calls (such as 'opt out' communication); recruitment of callers; training of callers and relevant stakeholders; management of the caller record system, daily co-ordinating of calls once alerts are generated; support for callers (such as pre and post caller meetings, ongoing caller queries, and availability and signposting of pastoral support for callers); and addressing issues as they arise (such as data and student issues).
    - Callers: call time (including leaving messages); follow-up processes (such as recording of calls and contact with tutors/students); pre and post call session meetings.
    - Student support services: administration support and senior level resource to assess whether students should not be contacted, training of callers in safeguarding and student support services provision.
    - Faculty: Lead contact(s) within each faculty.
    - Evaluation: planning and implementation of process and impact evaluation.

Preparation for the calls need to include:

- Preparation of call systems and equipment such as a mailbox specific to the call centre, and an automated message if appropriate.
- Training of call staff and preparation of relevant caller scripts and templates.
- Training of stakeholders where appropriate (for detailed information about training content see Appendix 14).

Communication with stakeholders needs to include:

- A clear communication plan that informs all stakeholders at key times throughout the process.
- Communication with faculties and students to promote the importance of keeping university contact details up to date.
- The importance of updating university systems with the name of each students' tutor and communications on how to do this.

Key aspects of the call process to include:

- Communication of clear guidelines for all relevant stakeholders about the role and responsibilities of the call team, the tutor, and student support services, particularly for ongoing student cases.
- An opportunity for the tutor and student support services to inform the call centre if a call is not advisable for that student on an individual basis.
- Each student informed that they will receive a call and the opportunity to 'opt out' of the call.
- Follow up communications to the student and tutor once the call has been attempted or taken place. Streamline these communications where possible whilst retaining the ability for flexibility in communications (such as using adaptable email templates).
- The alignment of the work of the call centre with existing policies on engagement and attendance where appropriate.
- A robust recording system to track each student case over time. Excel has the advantage of being easy to train the callers and was useful due to the quick response needed for this call trial. However, in the longer term a more robust CRM system is recommended that can provide appropriate access and sharing of relevant data across the institution. This will require consideration of relevant data sharing legislation and ethics.
- A process and an impact evaluation to inform ongoing process improvements and to gain an understanding of student issues to inform proactive interventions where appropriate. Early identification of measures of success and institutional reporting requirements to inform impact evaluation is essential in order to plan impact evaluation from the start of the process. This will ensure that all relevant data is recorded to allow evaluation to take place and reporting that can support institutional decision-making.

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