MELISSA WORTEL: Hi. My name is Melissa Wortel and I’m the Assistive Technology Officer at Griffith University. Today I’m going to talk about moving from on-campus to online. I’d like to start with acknowledgement of country. Griffith University acknowledges the traditional custodians of the land on which we are meeting and pays respects to Elders past, present and extends that respect to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. So first a little bit about me, so I started in this role about 10 years ago, when it was decided that we would like to trial an assistive technology position. It sits outside the disability service area. So this position has the advantage of a few things. So we’ve got two departments looking into solutions and we can also look at specific solutions and also university-wide solutions. So my job sits within digital solutions and I work really collaboratively with the accessibility and Disability Team. So I say I’m an honorary member of their team and it’s really because I work more closely with them, often than my team within digital solutions. So here at Griffith University, prior to COVID we had five physical campuses and one digital campus. On all these campuses we had assistive technology labs, each with a range of hardware and software. In terms of software, we’ve got things like Jaws and Zoom text and read & write and in terms of hardware we have magnifiers, we have electronic desks and blinds and doors. So within that then, so it uses – you can electronically book these labs and access those labs. So we’ve made these student independent. They’re in charge of booking their lab and accessing those labs. The labs, for the most part, are within the library. So they can access those labs at any time the library is open. We also have a range of software and hardware spread throughout the campuses. So, again, we’re looking at Jaws and Zoom text and read & write. Just on read & write there we have a site wide licence. So we can have read & write spread for all our staff, student computers, PC and Macs and it also extends to our students’ at home machines. We also have some hardware within our schools. We have some magnifiers. We have a magnifier – we have a student starting jewellery making, so there’s your magnifier for that and we also have some scope pads within science. So scope pads look like an iPad and it sits on top of a microscope to help the student see what’s on the slide below. So 2020 hit and which path were we going to take? The path forward really became unclear. We had set up and were doing well with assistive technology here at Griffith but how were we going to take that home, how were we going to continue to assist our students and how do we move the assistive technology that we have here at home and, I guess what we pride ourselves here at Griffith, so we were really able to trial and test solutions. Because of my position we often know ahead of time, sometimes six months ahead of time, what students are coming. So we can work with these students and really get a good solution for them so they can hit the ground running. We had already started the trimester and so we now had to have a solution straight away, for those students to keep going. Trimester 1 wasn’t going to stop, so how did we move forward? In addition to that we look at budget and resources. Prior to 2020, our budgets within universities and the like were already decreasing. Project funds were decreasing and so 2020 and then there was pretty much an almost stop on budgets and project funds. So we needed to look at how can we be more resourceful and what do we do in terms of, you know, supporting these students. So I guess it was that we were able then to take a step back and look, okay, well, what software do we have? There’s now a lot of accessibility features within software that we have and, you know, that’s software that’s coming in and the assistive software we already had. Are we best using that to our ability? Are there underutilised accessibility features within that software that we can use? So that was our aim going forward. We had great assistance for our suppliers. The suppliers really got on board quickly and I guess the fact that I’ve been in this position for a few years now, I’ve built up a great relationship with a lot of our suppliers. So they, you know, came on board and said, right, what can we do? You have this software at home. We can allow our students, during COVID, to have this software temporarily installed on their machines and not just those suppliers, it was a range of assistive tech hardware and software suppliers. So basically we looked at – and we didn’t just choose any option, I guess. We had to basically look at – because we didn’t want to choose an option that the students would no longer be able to use after COVID. So we chose that was something, yes, this is a great option, the students love it and then at the end of COVID we say, sorry we can’t afford that. We’re not going down that track. So we looked at what software we already had. So one example was we use Jaws and Zoom text here. So there’s a new product that has come out called Fusion, which is a combination of both. So we were able to use those – obtain that Fusion licence and have a look at that software and give that out to our students and so we had the benefit of testing nonuniversity software at no cost. So we could see down the track, is this software we need to seriously consider. So how do we get this software home? So we had to look at creating clear and accessible install instructions for our students. So students then were given the option, you know, could they install it themselves? Could they install it with the help of another person or did they need a staff member, with COVID measures in place, help to install that software? So these were the options that we gave our students and for the most part that worked well. Griffith also came on early, in particular, in the student computing area with a project called Project Cool-Aid. So as we were all at home and nobody was in the labs, machines were coming out of those labs. So the project was set up to have those machines put into the students’ homes. So students could apply, that had no or older equipment and they could take that home. Through my dealings with the disability, accessibility and disability area and IT, we were able to fast track this process for students with disabilities. So it also meant that if they needed the software, we could get the software on the machine before that computer went home. So as I said before, we have looked at what software we had. So, as I said, we have Read&Write here and so we really looked more at Read&Write, and the PC and the Mac versions, and also there’s a Chrome extension that if you haven’t had a chance to check out, please do, it’s a free extension and it’s really got some nice features you can use PDFs and the web and an online suite of Microsoft tools. So, please, if you get a chance have a look at that. We also, a couple of years ago, went over to Microsoft here at Griffith and, you know, we were really looking at, you know, okay, what does this have. What sort of features have Microsoft rolled out. So there’s a lot of nice tools within Microsoft. So, as you’re all aware, or you may not be, there’s a desktop and online version of Word and Outlook and things like that. Unfortunately the accessibility features on both of these systems are not the same. So the online version has much more rich features and much more – it’s much more developed but they both have, you know, the immersive reader. So we were looking at page colour and line focus and the read aloud functions, which are features that a lot of students and staff – are quite valuable to them. There’s also a dictate and translate. So whilst these appear more so in the online version, they will come to the desktop version. The only issue, I guess I have with a lot of things with Microsoft is that, one, it’s not a blanket roll out. So you may get the feature and three to six months later the person next to you may get it. They can also remove features with little to no notice. So you may be using a great feature and then next time you turn your computer on the feature is gone. But in saying that, like, they’re really looking at their accessibility features and if they take something out it often means they have a plan and a rolling out of a better feature in the future, if not already. So let’s talk about challenges. Obviously 2020 has come along with its own set of challenges. The biggest challenges, I think, we faced was, firstly, among communication methods. We’re used to seeing students face-to-face and being able to, you know, build up that rapport with them so we could – you know, and sit with them and say, okay, does this work? Does this not work? So we were able – a lot of trust, I guess, in the fact that these students were actually, you know, able to do a lot of this testing and trialling on their own. There was also a massive sense of urgency in task completion. As I said before, we were in the middle of a trimester. We didn’t have a chance to trial and test too much stuff out. So – and students needed to be able to access areas straight away. This put extra pressures on staff and really that lack of research before a student was rolled out – solution, sorry. So in addition to that, we’ve got different sorts of technology at home. I don’t know about you, I’m a family of five. I had kids at home and so we really had to juggle wifi. Who was going to be on at times, who was going to, you know, be using that wifi. We also look at the age of the machine, can your machine take assistive technology, are you able to connect up with your Collaborate or lecture session from home, and then to their level of IT experience. Students have gone from attending a lecture in person to having and getting on to that lecture at home and what if they have a question and how does that all work, so really a lot of challenges around students, you know, accessing university from their home. I just want to just tell you a bit of a story about the staff member we had, which I guess goes through what I’ve just been speaking about. So I originally installed Dragon for a client in 2018. It was a Griffith-owned PC, which was taken home during COVID and after a couple of months it stopped working. So there’d been an update for Dragon since the software had been initially installed, which they’d been eligible for so I sent out the instructions. They tried installing the software but for those who have installed Dragon before, may know that Dragon likes to throw a curve ball or two on installation, but they had issues again finalising that installation. I created additional instructions to assist them, the installation still failed. They contacted our IT department for assistance, but unfortunately they were unsuccessful in sorting those issues. I requested she come on site so I could have a look at the machine. However, as she had a desktop, not overly easy to bring it back on campus and due to the campus lockdown at the time we would have also required approval from various levels of management. I organised with my manager to go onsite and look at the issues first-hand. The issue was rectified but came back a few weeks later. I was able to go back out again and this time sort the issue permanently, well hopefully. This shows that we now need to extend our flexibility when dealing with students. It’s never going to be and never has been a one size fits all. The instructions that worked for others, just wouldn’t work for this staff member. How else can we do this thinking is now what’s required as we move away from our standard university environment. Let me just say though, it’s unrealistic to be able to visit all students and staff at their homes but should not be ruled out when all other tasks have been exhausted. Captioning. So to move on now. Captioning has been growing and growing at Griffith over the past few years. We’ve really tried to extend what we have here and so 2020 has really been a changing face for it. So we needed to look at areas that in the past with Collaborate and the like that were uncaptionable areas, they now needed to be captioned. So how do we do that? How do we take lectures and tutorials that are no longer in line and the Captioner can’t be there, how do we, you know, bring those two together, and we’re now dealing with lecturers using perhaps Teams or Stream or Echo or a range of different software presentation modes available, how are we going to caption that? So if the lecturer is learning a new system, how does the captioning work within that system and how do these students access that captioning from within those models? So a lot to learn within a short space of time and a lot of information to get out. So as you can imagine a lot of frustration but the team behind it captioning has worked really hard and have really great methods and instructions in place. So I think it has been a very smooth transition over to this new era of captioning here at Griffith. In addition to that, early on in the system the learning and teaching community came together and formed groups of like areas together, forming a COVID action group. Initially this group were meeting almost every day, if not every day, and they still meet a few times a week. So they’re looking at all areas of learning and teaching. So we’re looking at course delivery and set up. We’re looking at lecture delivery. How to best support our lecturers going forward. How do they check, is it accessible? How do they, you know, get their course materials ready, so that all students can access information and it has really been a great reset for lecturers and tutors and the like to say, okay, how can I better set my course up in the future so that it is accessible and I don’t have to keep re-creating stuff and material so that it’s accessible for all. Exams were another issue that they have done a lot of work in, you know, students’ online exams. We’ve looked at different pieces of software to assist our students, you know, and staff in making these exams accessible and if you’ve got a student, you know, that needs extra time, how is that going to work within that software? Again, this group has done – what am I trying to say here, has really come a long way and has really helped our learning and teaching community move forward. So moving forward to 2021, is it going to be different? I, for one, completely hope so. But do we need to change our focus now on how we incorporate assistive technology into the university environment? You know, we didn’t think that at the beginning of this year – Pathways14 that we would be online, but look how much we have all learnt in such a short space of time. You know, we’re all attending Zoom meetings. We’re all at home or at work or a combination of the both. So I think going forward, yes, I think students will come back to campus but, yes, I think there will also be a large portion done online. So I guess marrying those two together and how do we better support and make sure our students have the assistive technology that they require at home as well. So supporting students has always been a number one priority here and it will continue to be so in 2021 and I guess we’ll continue those different communication methods, you know, with our students, you know, what’s working and now I think they have a better idea of what’s happening, we have a better idea of what’s happening, we can navigate this new path and communication with them so that we’re all on the same page and, you know, they’ve got a better chance, okay, this worked but this didn’t and we’ve got a number of solutions now that we can offer our students. So future research. So I saw at Griffith here we always try to be on the cutting edge, I guess, of innovative solutions. We’re always on the look out and to me at the beginning of this year, you know, we’ve come so far. I thought, great, we’re in a great place. Griffith is going really well. We’ve got all these solutions and then, I guess, we get thrown a massive curve ball and we now need to look at new solutions, which is super exciting for me because this is what I love to do but, you know, I guess it gives our students now the chance to trial new solutions and give us feedback so we can grow Griffith even further and the assistive technology department so we can determine whether, you know, future solutions are viable and we can really test, you know, to make the student experience at home and at university the best they can be. Thank you all for your time. That’s the end of my presentation. If you want to contact me, my email address is m.wortel@griffith.edu.au and I’m happy to answer any questions online. Thank you very much.