

# Higher Education: More than a Degree

## Academic Communities

### Case Study 3: Digital Communities and Peer Support at Scotland's Rural College (SRUC)

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#### What was the issue?

Prior to COVID-19 and the new Enhancement Theme, the peer support that took place at SRUC was relatively informal and not centrally monitored. However, in order to respond to both we have established a new peer support programme, jointly supported by Academic Enhancement and programme teams, but run by student volunteers. Digital peer support has been an important part of our strategy this year - as we moved to online delivery, we wanted to make sure that student communities were still established and developed, recognising how vital they are to student wellbeing and experience. Developing digital communities is also beneficial to SRUC as we are a multi-campus institution.

#### How was it solved?

We established the programme by piloting two digital peer support groups. An open invite was sent round the institution for staff and students to express interest in setting up a group, and we were contacted by a staff member and a group of students (via our Students' Association). The two groups met with a member of the Academic Enhancement Team who assisted each project with recruiting volunteers, working out what they wanted their project to be like, what sessions/events to run etc. The Academic Enhancement Team also provided training for volunteers, focusing on online delivery and encouraging participation.

From here, each group created a Teams page which all relevant students were added to (initially, those on relevant courses). The volunteers then planned and ran a variety of digital community-building activities. Some of these were course-specific (for example, study skills sessions, content-based sessions); however, some were more interest-based and informal



(for example, online photo competitions; short, pre-recorded videos on practical skills; catch ups in the evening). Staff regularly catch up with the student volunteers to make sure that they feel supported and can ask questions.

## What comes next?

We plan to evaluate the projects over the summer, and hopefully establish some new peer support groups over the next academic year. Some of these may want to run in-person events, but likely many will remain entirely or partly digital. We also plan to develop some new training and support materials for volunteers for next year, based off feedback that volunteers have given us (particularly around digital skills).

We will also collaborate with our Students' Association in order to promote the sessions, linking peer support groups and societies. Some digital peer support groups may also be widened out, becoming more like the society model. An example of this is our Equine Community group, which is currently only available to students on Equine courses, but could be broadened out to include all students with an interest in horses.



## Find out more

This case study is one of 13 published as part of the Student-led Project from the Resilient Learning Communities Enhancement Theme.

The project in year 1 explored issues and themes relevant to how higher education institutions and students' associations/unions have recreated student communities in an online environment during the COVID-19 pandemic, what enablers and barriers this has created, and provides the opportunity to showcase and share examples of practice.

You can find further case studies and resources on the [Enhancement Themes website](#).

