

Higher Education: More than a Degree

Online Student Communities ► Extra-Curricular Communities

Case Study 2: 'Discovering DASA': Online Social Activities

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What was the issue?

The COVID-19 pandemic has hit everyone hard, especially those - young and old - in vocational education. Here, at Dundee and Angus College, the move to online learning was tough for everyone, but it soon became clear that it wasn't just the challenges of learning online that were problematic. Our students were suffering physically and, above all, mentally from the isolation of remote life. So how did we tackle this?

How was it solved?

Rather than employing a more traditional response, our Student Association decided to think creatively, reassessing how they interact with students and expanding rapidly what they could do. They began by applying Service Design methodology, looking not only at how they could better support the students, but building new ways of working around what the students themselves wanted and needed.

The impact of the [data gathered](#) has brought about a whole raft of innovations to engage and improve wellbeing. Two huge successes were a three-day online Summer Festival and the Big Night In. These events provided a whole weekend of entertainment with live acts, local bands, arts and crafts, and our very own Dundee and Angus Student Association (DASA) Night Before Christmas rendition.

The events raised over £1000 and allowed us to create the DASA Pay It Forward Fund, to help drive away the 'January blues' and to encourage and fund random acts of kindness for our student and staff community.

Our engagement with our students highlighted the need for more social experiences, so we have



created gameshows, activities and live acts to help students to take time out to relax and have fun – just as they would on campus. As a result, our social media community and engagement have simply exploded. Membership has more than doubled, interactions have jumped by 800%, and engagement with our students has increased by a whopping 1000% with over 60,000 interactions in just a few short months.

We haven't stopped there and have launched our 'Cuppy & Chats' to address isolation and loneliness, welcoming dozens of students each night. We were not prepared for how much everyone loves these events and the positive impact that they have had. The feedback is immense, humbling and heart-warming, with friendships and peer support blossoming right across our virtual college, bringing together departments and campuses in a way not seen before.

Using Service Design has helped us tap into what our students genuinely need, and we have created interdepartmental social and study 'Teams' spaces to recreate the missed coffee bar moments. These channels have allowed students to break out of their bubbles, have informal conversations, interact, and provide peer support and learning to each other.

The pandemic has forced all of us to change and adapt quickly, but DASA has grasped this more than anyone else, embedding a positive culture of change which is responsive and inclusive of our students' needs. Using Service Design, we continuously update our student support by actively engaging and listening to those who matter the most to us – our students themselves.

What comes next?

At the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic, it was vital that we engaged our students at every decision-making process into the services that we provide to the benefit of our students. Designing and co-creating with, and not for our students, increased their sense of ownership of their Students' Association. This ensured that the services, activities and events we offered were utilised in a way that was fit-for-purpose, was decided by the students themselves, increased the engagement with the Students' Association, as well as an increased understanding of the role that the Students' Association plays in their learner journey.

It has further allowed for greater change across the way that the College works and operates with more and more of our departments working in full partnership, creating with and not for our students. It has seen a remarkable increase in the key decision makers working in wider college agenda and operational processes coming together with our students and creating the college of the future. A closer partnership with our students and the College Board of Management, Exec and Senior Leadership Team has been such a success that we will be continuing these relationships and working partnerships into future years, building on the very strong foundation that we have created during these difficult times.

Keeping the students at the very heart of everything that we have carried out and completed, both at the Students' Association and the college level as a whole, has allowed our students to feel increasingly valued, included, respected and confident that they can continue to have their voices heard and collaborate at ease. We will continue to build upon all of the positive and collaborative partnerships that we have gained throughout these difficult times to become true partners within the College and its operation to the benefit of our students.



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



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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 at: www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk



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