

# Higher Education: More than a Degree

## Online Student Communities ►

## Student Representative Communities

### Case Study 3: Innovations in Digital Student Communities

Ayzel Calder, Ayesha Jamal and Selina-May Miller, MSc Information and Library Studies programme, Robert Gordon University (Course Lead: Dr Konstantina Martzoukou)

#### What was the issue?

In approaching how to best develop a community and support peers in a virtual programme during a pandemic, the role of the Course Representative in the Robert Gordon University MSc Information and Library Studies (ILS) programme, evolved into one of affinity, collaboration and amelioration. In the face of a larger than usual student group that operated in different modes (full-time and part-time), we created a team by sharing responsibility between three representatives who then each took on different leadership roles (such as hosting a reading group, creating and distributing surveys). Having more than one representative allowed us to collaborate, develop and brainstorm ideas; have different perspectives (between the two full-time and one part-time representatives); and ensure better morale and group cohesion (between the two modes).

#### How was it solved?

A student community was created and enriched through the use of Microsoft Teams (via a social area called 'A Wee Blether'), module forums, social media, a WhatsApp group and video social chats. With socialisation limited, virtual study groups and the sharing of resources, on the various platforms used in the programme, closed the distance between peers and opened a space for more casual conversations around the course work. The addition of a virtual reading group brought participants closer together in a more casual setting, allowing for more relaxed conversation and for relationships to naturally build. Reading one, member-suggested novel per semester, the group met via video chat to discuss their thoughts, and demonstrated how personal hobbies can be used as a bonding activity, and how digital technologies can overcome the boundaries of long-distance socialising.



We were able to further create a sense of community outside the course with academics and students from other universities by participating in a live international session with OneHE Mindsets group, exploring students' experiences of online learning in face of the COVID-19 pandemic. The OneHE Information, Digital Media Literacy: Mindsets group was set up by the Course Leader and aims to bring together educators and learning technologists from around the world to share good practice. Participating gave us new perspectives and insights that we could take and apply to our class and community and allowed us to make academic and professional connections and relationships.

It was the intention of this Course Representative role to help combat the feelings of isolation that frequently accompanies virtual learning. The continued impact of COVID-19 on online long-distance programmes held the potential of making the distance appear greater. Therefore, one of the primary goals of the Course Rep role within the ILS programme was to circumvent such feelings. While the class does not convene in person, we have succeeded in creating a close community of peers.

The goal of community building surpassed expectations; the fledgling state of friendship matured as the socialisation platforms became a place of shared knowledge and support. As Course Representatives, we distributed a weekly checklist to help simplify the virtual studying process and relieve stressors of missing course work, readings or lectures. This was presented on a collaborative forum, which offered space for questions or concerns that could be addressed together or passed on to the appropriate faculty member.

Most importantly, as Course Representatives, we created a safe area for our peers to pass on concerns and acted as intermediaries when anonymity was requested. A series of surveys were distributed to the class and allowed for reflections and feedback without the pressure of identity. This helped identify course delivery aspects that could be improved and allowed time for changes to be made before the end of the year.

## What comes next?

It is our hope that we can continue to offer this level of support to students in forthcoming semesters. The role of the Course Representatives everywhere is open to further development in order to create online communities and limit isolation within both online and in-person courses.



## 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](#).

