

# Higher Education: More than a Degree

## Online Student Communities ► Extra-Curricular Communities

### Case Study 1: 'Mind the Gap' - Bothies and Alpacas

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#### What was the issue?

This case study will focus on the initiatives we set up to enable students to overcome some aspects of the Covid Gap by providing extra-curricular opportunities.

I refer to the 'Covid Gap' which, from our interaction with students, illustrates the way in which the pandemic has impacted on students - in particular, missing informal extra-curricular community experiences related to their university time. The Covid Gap impacts on every student, but we felt that certain factors made the puzzle more complicated. These seemed to relate to how being in different year groups and different demographic factors affect the experience of Covid. There appears to be a generalised effect experienced by year groups as a continuum which is impacted by the length of time students have been on the course, size of the year group, and also the interconnectivity of the group.

A subset of demographic factors which also seem to influence the effect of Covid are detailed below:

- mature learners with childcare commitments
- learners studying and working from home
- rural learners with issues of connectivity
- those in low-income scenarios with IT poverty experienced for the first time
- those with learning support or mental health needs or who really struggle with lack of outdoor time and face-to-face communication.



The analysis for this initiative also sought a balance of experience and, therefore, it is useful to cover positive student feedback in relation to the Covid Gap. These included:

- newly-gained confidence in a virtual classroom setting in comparison to historic physical classroom experiences
- reduced costs associated to travel
- ability to self-pace more learning.

## How was it solved?

I want to emphasise that our initiatives were not aimed at 'fixing' the individual challenges experienced but to provide some varied outlets, some escapism and to try and enable new communities during this difficult period. These included:

- Using our virtual classrooms as a monthly film night - subject-themed events (for example, Halloween Wildlife), eat popcorn and chat.
- Blether Bothy - this illustrated that even our distance learners experienced the Covid Gap. We used a Microsoft Teams Platform to create a student-only space. This example also illustrated the evolution of these projects; initially requested in dialogue with students, the solution was facilitated with limited uptake but the space has evolved into a student support area which has worked well.
- Hug-an-Alpaca - this was purposefully placed in the middle of a college day as a 'time-out' opportunity, a replication of just getting away from things in the lunch break. A technically-innovative project not without challenges which illustrated how simple ideas with a bit of technical braveness really supported our students' wellbeing needs. We are very pleased with this initiative and have rolled it out to the whole college.

I hope this case study has illuminated our experience of the Covid Gap, the complexity of the issue which I am sure is shared by many institutions and some ideas for supporting students in an extra-curricular setting and how they worked and evolved.



## 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](#).

