

Higher Education: More than a Degree

Online Student Communities ►

Student Representative Communities

Case Study 2: Supporting Student Representative Communication and Community During COVID-19

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What was the issue?

Before COVID-19, we used a variety of methods to communicate with student representatives (Reps) and to develop a sense of community. These included emails, space on our virtual learning environment (VLE), social media and in-person events. While each of these methods had their benefits, the overall experience was often inconsistent and confusing. Opportunities for engagement were also limited by students' social media presence and geographic location, something which particularly impacted online distance learners.

How was it solved?

Creating a Microsoft Teams area - the Academic Representation Forum - provided a central hub for Programme and School Representatives to connect with each other, as well as staff and the Sabbatical Officers at the Students' Association. The Forum replaced emails as the primary communication tool, the VLE as the primary space to host key documents, and in-person events as the primary way for Reps to connect and build community.

The Forum is composed of both public and private channels for all Reps - Undergraduate and Postgraduate Reps; School Reps; and all Reps within each school. The larger channels are primarily used by us to make announcements and by Reps to ask questions, while the smaller channels are used for community building and discussion of specific issues relevant to one school.

Over 1420 Reps accessed this support throughout the year, with over 90% being active users. From introducing themselves, to collaborating with each other on how to gather feedback, and



developing proposals for Student Council, the Forum created opportunities to build the Rep community, with dialogue sustained throughout the year in the form of posts, replies, and reactions.

The Forum also gave School Representatives easy access to all the Programme Representatives in their school, something which we had previously been reliant on schools to facilitate. As a result, Schools Reps were a lot more visible to Programme Reps, asking for input on their work and posting updates from relevant meetings. This also gives us an insight into the school-level discussions we normally would not be privy to.

The Forum also increased the visibility of Students' Association staff and the Sabbatical Officers to Reps, with increased engagement and Reps feeling more comfortable reaching out for advice. Reps have asked about accessing and using data, something we have subsequently been able to provide training on, responding to challenging feedback, and support in developing student surveys.

The Forum has also helped build engagement, as Reps are able to see others actively participating in discussions and sharing updates on their activity, normalising positive behaviours and reinforcing messaging received in training and from association staff.

What comes next?

The Academic Representation Forum on Microsoft Teams was well-utilised by Reps throughout the year, and will be retained next year, even as in-person activity resumes.



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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](#).

