

Case Study 9: Student Engagement and Onboarding in the Virtual Environment

Introduction and Context:

Due to Covid-19 and College closure in March 2020, student engagement events could no longer take place in person. Consequently, the International Student Support Team had to move all their communication and activities online. In the following case study, we will outline the steps that have been undertaken to provide the same quality student support and engagement in a new virtual environment.

Summary of Initiatives Undertaken:

Social Media Strategy Revision

Within the first month of College closure, the International Support Team established the following events:

- Virtual Coffee & Chat - Meetings on Zoom to give students a platform to check in and ask questions.
- Netflix Party
- Online Competitions (Virtual Art Gallery, Photo Competition, Talent Show)
- Staff & Student Takeovers
- Instagram Live Chats with current students

In pivoting towards an online service, the International Department revised its social media strategy, focussing firstly on Instagram. This was deemed the most suitable platform for the age range of our target groups which are: Applicants, current students but also alumni.

The focus of the Instagram strategy was threefold:

- Entertainment and Engagement between the International Support Team and Students (Motivation Mondays, Motivational videos and messages, Throwback Thursdays)
- Provision of information about Covid-19 (levels and travel restrictions) and College updates (upcoming virtual fairs and webinars)
- Creation of interest in Dublin and Ireland as a study destination (Fun Fact Fridays, Student Features of local points of interest on weekends)

Consequently, NCI's Instagram following has grown by 20% and performance of posts has reached up to 15% compared to an average Instagram performance of 1 - 3% ([source](#)). Since August 2020, the international team is supported by an international NCI student in their final year of their BA (Hons) in Marketing Practice who has further developed the social media strategy to include: Student top tips, promotional videos, links to resources available to students, student experience accounts.

Virtual Welcome Programme

One of the strongest pillars of support the International Team provides is a welcome programme for each intake in September and January which lasts between 3 and 6 weeks. This welcome programme is organised by the International Support Team but largely hosted by peer mentors. Peer mentors are NCI students in a paid part-time position at the International Office.

Virtual Welcome Programme - September 2020

To be able to replicate the welcome programme in an online environment for the first time in September 2020 the following preparations were made in advance of the September 2020 arrivals:

- Increase in numbers of peer mentors from 12 to 25
- 1 peer mentor role solely dedicated to digital marketing and student engagement

- Preparation of extensive 6-week welcome programme
- Creation of new event: daily 'Meet your Mentors' check-ins. In the absence of face-to-face meetings, we organised daily drop-in sessions for students to ask peer mentors questions about anything relating to life in Ireland and being a student at NCI
- Organisation and facilitation of training day for existing and new peer mentors to brief on new intake approach
- Tailored welcome meetings for students: 1) travelling to Ireland to start their course 2) already resident in Ireland 3) starting their course from their home country
- Preparation of scripts for all upcoming online welcome meetings as well as optional events
- Introduction of 3 peer mentors to September Freshers Facebook Group to engage with students via private messaging
- Decision to use MS Teams as platform to deliver all meetings as this would be the main platform for tuition to be delivered to students. The aim was to familiarise students with the platform before classes started.
- Use of Google Forms to gauge interest in events or if need be crowd control
- Publishing of Welcome Programme on NCI website including links to registration forms.

The welcome programme consisted of just under 120 events, spread out over 6 weeks. It included a mix of the following categories:

1) Pre-scheduled and compulsory to attend

- Welcome Meetings: These are small group meetings which every international student is scheduled for by the international support team. In case of no-shows, students are re-scheduled until they have attended the event. The last welcome meeting is recorded and will be shared with students who did not attend the final meeting. Due to the re-scheduling of students attendance is close to 100%.

2) Highly recommended

- The Essentials & Student Life: These are meetings informing students about student life and establishing themselves in Ireland.

3) Optional

- Know-how events: These are workshops informing students about accommodation, public transport, culture shock and banking.
- Meet-up events: These are networking events including Meet your Mentors, Coffee & Chat, ice breaker games, origami, quizzes, Introduction to Irish Language and Culture as well as virtual escape rooms and a Freshers Party.
- Out & About events: There are interactive virtual tours facilitated by a certified tour guide. Tours included: Tour of Dublin, Tour of Northern Ireland coastline and a tour to the West of Ireland.

Conclusion:

Due to the nature of the original welcome programme, it was possible to move events online without many issues. MS Teams was a useful tool to create online meeting rooms for students to gather. The International Team feel confident that despite the challenges of COVID-19, they managed to create an inclusive environment for international students at NCI. Throughout the crisis the International Team continues to engage with students from the Americas to Europe to Africa to Asia and the feedback so far has been very positive. An analysis of the September 2020 virtual Welcome Programme will be completed in advance of the programme launched for January 2021 entrants.