Quick Guide to Virtual Common Rooms

What is a virtual common room?

A virtual common room is a student-led and community-focussed online space. Students can use it to engage with their peers in an extra-curricular or social setting. It is intended to provide an alternative for gathering in physical common rooms, cafes or community spaces on campus. A virtual common room is a tool to help students overcome feelings of isolation or disconnection during periods of increased social distancing.

A virtual common room is not limited by physical access constraints, so students can utilise it 24 hours a day, seven days a week to work, collaborate or unwind.

What platform should we use for a virtual common room?

Students and staff have traditionally used social media platforms to establish online communities at LSE (e.g. Facebook, WhatsApp). However not all students are able to engage in these existing channels; they may choose not to maintain a social media presence or cannot access certain platforms in some countries. Student-owned groups may not include the entire cohort and staff-owned groups may serve a primarily administrative function that is not conducive to peer community building.

When the UK entered lockdown in March 2020, LSE trialled using Microsoft Teams to create of virtual common rooms for students who remained in halls of residence. This was a short-term project intended primarily to facilitate social interaction among residents over the Easter closure period. In recent months, other institutions have also opted to use Microsoft Teams for this purpose, including University College London and Imperial College.

Advantages of using Microsoft Teams:

- Teams is a globally available technology that is available at no cost to all members of the LSE community with an LSE email address and password.
- Teams is available on multiple devices (e.g. laptop, tablet, phone).
- Teams are simple for staff to set up, promote using a joining link, and administer membership requests securely. Technical guidance is available from DTS.
- Teams offers comprehensive functionality including customisable privacy settings, themed channels, group or break-out conversation threads (including the option to use informal emojis or GIFS), whole-team or smaller-group video meetings.

Disadvantages of using Microsoft Teams:

- It is another system for LSE students to download and familiarise themselves with, especially if it is not going to be used for other purposes within the department.
- Most students are not currently familiar with using Teams to its full extent e.g. personalisation of notification settings, use of the command *@general* in posts to notify fellow team-members, etc.
- Students need to see Teams being used as a social, community-focussed platform to encourage and sustain engagement. Please see "How should we administer the Virtual Common Room?" for ideas about how to achieve this.

In addition to the platforms LSE already uses for online community building that could be developed into a Virtual Common Room (e.g. Moodle, Facebook, etc.), the University of Birmingham have trialled using Discord amongst their postgraduate research community.

What should we consider when planning a virtual common room?

- **Student partnership:** the LSE Curriculum Shift 2020 asks colleagues to work in partnership with students when developing effective community-building initiatives and online environments. How can you design and implement a virtual common room in partnership with students?
- **Cohort size:** would your students like their virtual common room to be a community space for the entire department, study-level, programme or year group? This will likely vary by department.
- **Complementary activities:** how will the virtual common room function alongside other community-building initiatives? If the Virtual Common Room is to be a student-led space, this differentiation is likely to be quite clear. However, if it's to be a space for building a student *and* staff community, it's important to give this some thought. The answer to this question may also help determine which platform to use for the virtual common room. For example, Teams is useful because it offers in-built chat and video-calling functionality, but it may be less useful if you already plan to use other systems (e.g. Zoom) to facilitate these interactions.
- **Moderating behaviour:** how will the department communicate expectations around how this space is used? How can students flag and report any concerning behaviour? Please see "how should we administer the Virtual Common Room" for further information.

How should we administer the Virtual Common Room?

UCL's experience of providing a virtual social space for students reinforces the importance of making a virtual common room a predominantly "students only" environment. The programme directors believe that making it a private space "encourages the psychological peer-to-peer engagement […] therefore we would only join if they invited us to do so and only for social purposes". Staff may therefore decide not to maintain a visible presence on the virtual common room.

Whichever platform you use for establishing a virtual common room, it is important that students are given the opportunity to create the type of community space that works for them. Ideally, students would not only be involved in the process of planning and designing the virtual common room, but also take the lead in posting content and organising virtual events on there. If your department has a student social committee, they could be given responsibility for this area of work, or you could consider appointing designated virtual common room ambassadors.

However it is likely that staff will need to retain access to the virtual common room in order to approve membership requests and/or intervene in any cases of concerning student behaviour. It is important that all members of the virtual common room understand that they are responsible for using this online space in a respectful, inclusive and appropriate manner. It is equally important that students are aware of how to flag any concerning behaviour, and what the repercussions are for posting inappropriate content. The Terms and Conditions of the LSE Student Hub may provide a useful framework to apply to the virtual common room.