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Meet them where they are: bringing the Learning Co-Op into the digital space

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Meet them where they are: bringing the Learning Co-Op into the digital space

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Abstract:  
The University of Wollongong (UOW) Learning Co-Op developed an online portal to complement its physical services, providing support for the development of students’ academic, information, and digital literacies. A user-centred design process was used to identify student needs and create meaningful, relevant content. The project employed student partners to ensure the inclusion of a strong student voice, and integrated a peer-led design strategy where the student partners identified and advocated for the needs of other students. The project utilised a collaborative approach to the creation of resources and service models, working with UOW students and staff from multiple professional units.
Providing learning support in the digital space

The most recent New Media Consortium (NMC) Horizon Report (2017, p.18) indicates that “students have become more adept at navigating digital environments and engaging with online content — and enjoy the convenience it affords”. Staff who work directly with supporting students often anecdotally cite the student preference for ubiquitous access to resources, and their expectations of the content available in a digital space. This anecdotal evidence is reflected in the literature reviewed by the Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC) study into students' expectations and experience of the digital learning environment, which speaks to students’ strong preference for the virtual learning environment to be a one-stop shop with “everything delivered in the one place” (Beetham, White & Wild 2013, p.10).

In recent studies of undergraduate perceptions of the usefulness of digital technology conducted across two Australian universities, 32.7% (of the 1658 students surveyed) identified that having flexibility to access their university-related content was an important factor in the use of digital technologies at university, second only to the use of technology to complete specifically subject-related tasks, such as managing their enrolments, and fulfilling course and assessment requirements (Henderson, Selwyn & Aston 2017). In the same study, 26.4% of surveyed students identified technology that supported basic tasks, such as writing assignments and finding and using relevant information, as being beneficial. Students reported a preference for digital access to university materials because it allowed them to be location-independent, freeing them to multitask or manage other aspects of their lives, such as work and family, without the obligation to physically come to campus (Henderson, Selwyn & Aston 2017). Others reported the convenience of having access to a huge base of information from a lightweight digital device, as opposed to carrying books and physical materials. A further cited benefit was the ability to work up until the deadline, removing the need to work around campus-facility opening hours (Henderson, Selwyn & Aston 2017).

The use of digital technology and resources is also a positive factor in supporting learning needs across multiple campuses. UOW has several Australian and international campuses, and it is important to provide flexible access to information and services across those campuses without compromising quality (Beldarrain 2006). The UOW Learning Co-Op has a presence on many of the UOW Australian campuses, but there is some diversity in the services offered at each campus due to pragmatic concerns such as staffing and space. Creating an online complement to the Co-Op enables students from any UOW campus to access key academic skills resources, regardless of time or location.

History of the UOW Learning Co-Op and conceptualising the Learning Co-op online portal

The UOW Learning Co-Op is a collaborative partnership between professional services units across the Deputy Vice Chancellor (Academic) portfolio at the University of Wollongong, including Learning Development, Peer Learning, the Library and UOW
College. The units, referred to as Member Service Providers (MSPs), provide a range of academic support services, which prior to the existence of the Co-Op were fragmented and often operating in isolation. Since 2015, the Co-Op has united its services into a “one-stop-shop” for student academic support, realised physically by a peer-supported study area in which Peer Academic Coaches (PACs) and Library Rovers provide triage academic support and refer students to other Co-Op services, which include seminars, consultations and online resources (see Fig 1 below) (Goodway et al. 2016). Alongside the student-facing aspects of the Co-Op, the Member Service Providers continue to work towards consolidating their data collection and reporting mechanisms, strategic links and funding sources to increase collaboration across the Co-Op.

Fig 1: Model of the UOW Learning Co-Op, as conceptualised in 2015. Developed and socialised by Dr. Alisa Percy (Goodway et al. 2016). Acronyms: UOW College (UOWC), Learning Development (LD), Learning Teaching and Curriculum (LTC), Peer Assisted Study Sessions (PASS).
Co-Op services are highly frequented, with 70% of students using the service more than once. In the first session of 2017 (March to June), 2381 interactions occurred across the five domestic campuses that have a Co-Op presence. Of these, 868 were peer-help enquiries. PAC and Rover staff resolved 57% of those enquiries at the service point, and referred 33% to further MSP services (such as consultations, workshops, or online resources). An additional 1513 users interacted with the service in a non-peer setting: 791 of those were non-peer consultations, 595 non-unique users attended workshops, while 127 non-unique users completed online self-paced modules.

In 2016, the Co-Op Member Service Providers flagged that a digital space was needed to complement and expand existing Co-Op services. Prior to the project, the Co-Op’s digital presence took the form of a singular webpage “band-aiding” the presence and digital learning resources of each MSP together. Resources from the MSPs were housed across different institutional platforms in a variety of modes and formats. This posed a significant challenge to the MSPs, PACs and Rovers when referring students to Co-Op services, and to students who were looking for the Learning Co-Op or seeking help independently.

Work towards correcting this issue began in 2016, albeit in isolation. Initial conversations were held around strengthening the collaborative relationships between the professional units. Learning Development secured Student Services and Amenities Fee (SSAF) funding to revamp the unit’s outdated academic support resources. Learning Development staff partnered with students to modernise and expand on the unit’s resource suite. Over 100 web-page resources were generated by the student resource-developers, in preparation for the creation of a Learning Hub website. The Library also took steps towards revamping its digital learning resources and strengthening its collaborative partnerships in 2016, with the redevelopment of the compulsory academic literacy program StartSmart. The StartSmart program covers introductory academic skills, including developing and refining search strategies, finding and using academic information sources, and developing good academic integrity practices. The 2016 redevelopment saw Library staff collaborate with Educational Design and Academic Integrity staff to include enhanced instruction on academic integrity practices, in line with a renewed strategic focus on academic integrity across the institution. Finally, the SSAF-funded Critical Digital Literacies project (now part of the Library) refreshed its asynchronous and synchronous digital literacies modules and resources, again with the input of student developers. By the end of 2016, the Learning Co-Op had succeeded in updating the suite of current academic support resources, but still faced the challenge of having those resources consolidated in a central space that emulated the “one-stop-shop” concept employed by the Co-Op’s collaborative model and peer-supported learning space.

In 2017, further SSAF-funding was secured to build the Learning Co-Op online portal. The Co-Op saw the development of this space as an opportunity to improve its digital presence, to consolidate the digital learning resources, and to increase equity amongst students, as it could provide Co-Op services to students on regional, metropolitan and offshore campuses and to those who need assistance outside of the University’s
standard operating hours. These benefits aligned with the broader strategic goals of the University, in particular goals 2.3, 2.4 and 5.4, which centre on enabling student transition across their degree, enriching their learning via supportive and innovative learning communities and environments, and providing digital solutions that enrich and connect our diverse locations (University of Wollongong 2016). The Learning Co-Op online portal would provide the Co-Op with a digital presence for promoting its services, bring together and expand on the digital learning resources of all Member Service Providers, explore the possibility of expanding peer-support services into the virtual space, and connect students to external services (i.e., Disability Support, Student Central, Information Management and Technology Services) where appropriate.

Human-centred design approach: towards a digital space that truly meets the needs of students

Design thinking is an iterative approach to design and planning that prioritises empathy with the user, creatively developing potential solutions, and cycling the resulting prototype through a feedback and refining process, viewing the end result as continually evolving. It begins by identifying a design problem, and prompts the practitioner to consider a range of solutions that might meet user needs. The user-centred approach of design thinking techniques was championed by the project team, some of whom had previous experience with using design thinking to successfully challenge legacy practices and approaches to service delivery by focusing on the evolving needs of the client base as the primary priority (Newton & Riggs 2016).

The design thinking methodology developed by the Stanford d.school (2017) was used throughout the development of the portal, using five elements to guide staff through the design thinking process: Empathise, Define, Ideate, Prototype, and Test. To build empathy with the student perspective, the project team began by doing a broad needs analysis, using a blend of professional experience and Library developed student personas as a tool to identify the learning support needs of the various cohorts. In the early weeks of the project, as is common with the use of design thinking, the project team cycled back and forth between the Empathise and Define stages of the design thinking process before defining the question “How might we effectively deliver learning support in the digital space?”

The team then entered the Ideation stage, considering a range of potential solutions including real-time virtual Learning Co-Op consultations, the development of an app that delivered personalised learning content to the student user, and MOOC-style (Massive Open Online Course) virtual classes and programs. While the needs of the student user were paramount throughout the design process, it was also necessary to be pragmatic about what could be realistically delivered. As the project was dependent on SSAF-funding, this added specific conditions to the outcomes, including limitations around embedding the resource as a curriculum requirement, and a strict timeframe for delivery. Taking these conditions and the available human and technological resources into account, the team identified that the development of an online portal that served as a digital complement to the “one-stop-shop” approach of the physical Learning Co-Op
was desirable, and that this portal should: be easily accessible and navigable, use student-centred language, and contain a mixture of PDF/Word documents, digital learning objects, and videos. Ideal characteristics of the online space, including clean, responsive design, and the ability for students to self-identify their learning needs and easily pinpoint appropriate resources, were also identified.

Taffs and Holt (2013, p.501) state that “in order to be accessed, resources must match student needs as well as their expectations”, and a primary goal in the development of the Learning Co-Op online portal was that a genuine student voice be present throughout the project. In terms of the design thinking process, the development of a working prototype began during the process of seeking student partners to work together with the project team as project officers. Once the students were employed, a second round of empathising with the student perspective began via direct feedback from the student partners themselves, and the prototype re-entered the Ideation phase in response to the feedback of the student partners and their knowledge of the needs and preferences of their peers. The project’s commitment to a flexible prototype, which was open to feedback, allowed for this iterative approach, and led to a prototype that incorporated a more holistic range of perspectives.

Student partners: close collaboration with core users

A cornerstone of the project design was the engagement of students in partnership to more strongly position the Learning Co-op online portal as a valuable tool for its core users. This approach fed into the project’s implementation of human-centred design practices, and its broader approach to maximising opportunities for student input. Healey, Flint and Harrington (2014, p. 7) describe partnership “as staff and students learning and working together to foster engaged student learning and engaging learning and teaching enhancement… It is a way of doing things, rather than an outcome in itself”. Adding to this, the Higher Education Academy (2017) states “Partnership [in learning and teaching] involves treating all partners as intelligent and capable members of the academic community”. The team viewed students as experts in their own learning, and by engaging them as partners, felt they filled a gap in the team’s expertise. Broadly, the goals of incorporating student partners into the project was to ensure that the student voice guides and informs the development of the online portal and the content contained therein, and to collect rich user feedback on the concept, prototype, content and final design from UOW students.

Institutions internationally and nationally have recognised the value of engaging students as partners at all levels of higher education. The Higher Education Academy (2017) in the United Kingdom has extensively focused on student engagement through partnership in recent years, including the development of a framework and numerous guidance and teaching resources. Nationally, the approach to student engagement has been the subject of a fellowship at the University of Queensland’s Institute for Teaching and Learning Innovation (ITaLI). The fellowship aims to raise the profile of the engagement approach, and has identified case studies across numerous national institutions (Institute for Teaching and Learning Innovation 2017). At the institution level,
the University of Wollongong has had several recent initiatives piloting the engagement approach. In 2016, the University’s central learning and teaching unit piloted a ‘students as change agents’ program that gave students the opportunity to complete research projects and instigate meaningful change at the institution (Lawson, Shalavin & Khatouki 2016).

The project team’s approach to building partnership was grounded in Cook-Sather, Bovill and Felten’s (2014) guiding principles on student partnership – respect, reciprocity and shared responsibility. These principles guided the conceptualisation of the student partner role, and underpinned decisions on responsibilities, recruitment, and remuneration. Emphasis was also placed on empowering students and tackling learned attitudes and behaviours stemming from power imbalances between staff and students (Healey, Flint & Harrington 2014). Conceptually, the student partners were considered equal stakeholders in the project, both because they represented the core users of the portal, and, as the project is SSAF-funded, because they represent those who funded it. As such, it was expected that they receive the respect awarded to other Co-Op members, and an appropriate level of responsibility based on their time commitments. Students were invited to all stakeholder meetings, considered equal parties in decision-making, and tasked with leading the acquisition of student feedback throughout the project.

Engaging students as partners demands a shift in thinking from both staff and students, from the passive approach of simply ‘listening’ to the student voice, to encouraging open dialogue and co-creation (Healey, Flint & Harrington 2014). Bridging this gap began as early as the interview process, wherein applicants were informed that they would be seen as equal stakeholders and encouraged to communicate openly and honestly. Efforts were also made to ensure students felt they had a consistent “home” in the office, amongst other project and non-project staff, to foster a sense of belonging. Weekly team meetings with the project leads were used as an opportunity to further foster partnership with students through recognition of work and problem-solving discussions.

Underpinning partnership is reciprocity – “all parties have an interest in, and stand to benefit from working and/or learning in partnership” (Higher Education Academy 2014). Given the positioning of the student partner roles as equal stakeholders in the Learning Co-Op online portal project, it was logical that they should be paid. Remuneration for the hours worked by the students recognised the expertise they brought to the project and worked towards breaking down the power dynamics staff and student roles. To guide the design of the student partner roles, the project crafted a statement of reciprocity as follows: 'In exchange for assurance that the portal and content contained therein meets key user's needs, and for aid when conducting evaluation process at various stages of project, the project team will endeavour to not only pay student partners, but also endeavour to provide opportunities for them to improve their research, communication, advocacy and negotiation skills'. This statement was used to determine the student partners’ responsibilities and everyday activities.
Candidates were selected based on their potential to advocate for the wider student body. Care was taken to avoid selecting students based on either their academic performance or employment record, as these records do not demonstrate their advocacy skills. Two student partner roles were advertised under the title of Project Officer. This decision was based on anecdotal evidence that students felt the title ‘Student Partner’ had become overexposed, and that it held little value when listed on a resume. Applicants were required to submit their resume, along with a short expression of interest addressing the question “What is important to you in a digital learning space?” Once shortlisted, applicants were invited to attend an informal interview with the project leads. The successful candidates were selected based on their capacity to advocate for their peers, determined by their established networks and their communication skills as demonstrated in the interview. In particular, during their interview both of the successful candidates demonstrated the ability to have open dialogue with the project leads around possible solutions to the design problem.

Healey, Flint and Harrington (2014) note that partnerships are rarely equal. Although the project team conceptualised the students as equal stakeholders, the pragmatic constraints stemming from their status as students and casual workers prevented this. It is unfair to expect the students to take on a workload equal to the full time staff working on the project. While the opinion of students was given equal weight, their everyday responsibilities and activities were adjusted to match their paid-time commitment to the project. The project team also allowed flexibility, with office hours based on the student’s study commitments. The student’s primary responsibilities were to:

- Advocate for the wider study body in all facets of the project.
- Provide feedback and approval, when required and in a timely manner.
- Lead evaluation and user testing of portal by students.
- Attend relevant stakeholder meetings.

The successful students commenced in June and were hired for a period of 30 weeks, and completed three paid hours of work each week. Throughout the project, their activities have included:

- Advocating for their peers throughout the project
- Attending stakeholder meetings
- Conducting focus groups with their peers
- Evaluating existing and redeveloped content
- Evaluating portal prototype and final design

Framework

Taffs and Holt (2013, p.500) state that “educational design decisions about e-resource development must focus first on the purpose and pedagogy, rather than just the technologies available”. The content and design of the Learning Co-Op online portal was informed by a scaffolded Digital Literacy Framework developed by the UOW Library (internal document as of October 2017), ensuring that relevant and appropriate tools and resources are accessible to students throughout their undergraduate journey.
The design of the framework emerged from an observed need for a consistent structure to map the potential development of students’ information and digital literacy skills, and provide seamless links to relevant support resources and services. The framework identifies three levels of digital literacy skills development: Developing, Proficient, and Expert. It is strongly informed by the Digital Literacies Framework developed by Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC) (2017), and the adaptation of the JISC model developed by La Trobe University (2017). The resources contained in the portal, including the existing StartSmart and Manage Use Create (digital literacy) programs that are targeted towards first-year undergraduate students, are predominantly aimed at the Developing (entry) level, with phase two developments in 2018 planned to expand on the available resources and offer support for students to continue developing their academic and digital literacy skills.

Also targeted for 2018 is the development of a self-assessment tool to be located within the portal, enabling students to self-identify the resources that are best suited to their skill level and personalise their learning experience. Student use of this tool would be optional, and it would enable them to seamlessly engage with the scaffolded support appropriate to their level without needing to engage with the Digital Literacy Framework as a document in its own right. The framework is intended primarily as a tool for academic staff and curriculum developers, enabling them to easily identify the appropriate services and resources available to support their students, rather than as a student-facing resource.

**Institutional partnerships and collaboration**

Institutional collaboration among academic and professional units and an attitude of collegiality and open communication are pivotal to the future strategic directions of UOW, and feature regularly in the UOW Strategic Plan for 2016-2020 (University of Wollongong 2016). There are several examples of successful collaborative relationships among the academic community within the literature, often situated within broader discussions about the benefits of the ‘information commons’ or ‘learning commons’. Beagle (2006, cited in Beagle 2010) discusses the shift from an Information Commons, a “cluster of network access points and associated IT tools situated in the context of physical, digital, human, and social resources organized in support of learning” (p.xviii) to a more transformational change agent termed the Learning Commons, stating that the shift is due to its resources being “organized in collaboration with learning initiatives sponsored by other academic units, or aligned with learning outcomes defined through a cooperative process” (p. xviii). Taylor (2003, cited in Beard 2011, p. 112) states that “curriculum development [does] not rest with one individual but [is] a shared responsibility”, and Beard (2011, p.112) cites the benefits of collaboration between “a staff developer, learning technologists, and librarians”. Kezar (2005, p. 834) states that “in order to be considered collaboration, it is key that the process entail an interactive process (relationship over time) and that groups develop shared rules, norms and structures, which often become their first work together”.

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The Learning Co-op online portal is a virtual Learning Commons, building on the established collaborative relationships, norms and vision already developed within the Learning Co-Op. It utilised a collaborative institutional approach to designing the portal and developing or reusing content, drawing on the various areas of expertise offered by the professional services units across campus. Project leads maintained strong communication with the Learning Co-Op Governance and Leadership groups throughout the development of the portal, both to ensure that the portal continued to meet stakeholder needs, and to draw on the professional experience and expertise of Co-Op members. Feedback from educational design staff was sought at various stages of the project, ensuring that the pedagogical design of the proposed prototype met good usability and academic practice guidelines. Library staff specialising in content strategy were consulted throughout the development of the portal, ensuring that the portal was intuitively located, easily navigable, and utilised an approachable and consistent student voice.

In mid-2017, project leads met with members of the Learning Co-Op Strategy and Governance group to discuss the potential for the portal hosting synchronous virtual learning consultations. This development, to be investigated and developed further throughout 2018, would provide online access to Peer Academic Coaches as well as staff from the various Member Service Providers via one-on-one virtual consultations. The Peer Learning service had already begun scoping the potential of this service for Peer Assisted Study Session (PASS) classes, separately from the Learning Co-op online portal project identifying it as a desirable outcome. The collaborative model and communication channels already established through the Learning Co-Op meant that these discussions did not progress in isolation as they may have, but instead allowed both parties to take a collaborative approach to investigating the possibility of virtual consultations in 2018.

**Portal design: balancing pedagogy with practicality**

Several factors were considered in selecting the appropriate channel and platform for the portal: responsive design, intuitive navigation, ability to embed multimedia content such as video, and primarily a single location that brings together the content across the different professional services units so that students can easily identify and navigate to the material that meets their needs. This one-stop-shop approach is reflective of the collaborative nature of the Learning Co-Op model.

In line with the design thinking approach, initial scoping of the ideal design for the portal began by empathising with student needs, based on the analysis conducted with the use of representative student personas discussed earlier. This analysis revealed that there was a large degree of crossover in the needs of different cohorts in regard to a digital resource portal - namely that the resources be easy to access, intuitively named and located, and that there was a variety of resource types to cater for different learning styles and preferences.
A common assumption among staff in higher education is that digital is the preferred mode of delivery for the majority of students. Literature, however, indicates that attempts to characterise the modern student as a digital native are misguided (Jones & Shao 2011). Complicating factors such as an individual’s level of digital literacy, access to technology and available Internet connection, if any, all play into their ability to access and make effective use of learning support delivered in the digital environment. Making design decisions based on the assumption that digital is the preferred delivery mode for the majority of students can serve to create a barrier for the student who has a lower level of access to support in this environment, whether that is due to skill or confidence level, or lack of infrastructure. This diversity in digital skills and access was one of the central factors considered in the exploration of potential design solutions, and the project leads were mindful to avoid assumptions and base design decisions on the real needs of students as expressed through the needs analysis.

An environmental scan of similar learning websites at other academic institutions was conducted to gain inspiration for effective structuring of the portal, and determine the kinds of material commonly available. This scan was initially conducted by the project leads to inform initial scoping of the portal, and their documentation was then provided to the student project officers so they could revisit the sites and provide further feedback from a student perspective. Best-practice examples observed as part of this process included the use of clean, inviting, and well organised landing pages, floating or tabbed menus to provide clear navigation without dominating the page, banners for key information that may change throughout the session (such as date-specific events), and the ability to easily print to PDF for offline use.

The final prototype incorporated many of these best practice examples. As pictured in Figure 2 (next page), the online portal homepage incorporates intuitive categories for online resources, a rotating banner to showcase date-specific events and resources, a clean design that is consistent with other UOW CMS pages, and quick link buttons to additional services provided by the Co-Op MSPs, including consultations and peer services available on each campus. The design for the prototype pictured below was driven by the student partners, who drew on their own experience as students as well as the feedback they had received from their peers. The prototype has been presented to a number of stakeholders including Co-Op MSPs, student partners, and a group of PACs and Rovers, all of whom provided positive and affirming feedback as to its inviting design and effective navigation.
The attitude of open collaboration underpinning the project informed the desire for the resulting portal to be openly accessible, so that staff and students from other institutions could use and benefit from the resources. Initial ideas for the design of the portal included a self-assessment component that would allow students to personalise their
learning experience through using a self-assessment tool that evaluated the content most relevant to their learning needs. Investigative work began on this aspect of the portal design in collaboration with educational design staff early in the project, but as these discussions progressed, it was identified that the available software to create this feature would rely on institutional user accounts. The potential complexity of implementing login-based self-assessment functionality across multiple campuses, together with the desire for providing openly accessible resources, meant that this aspect of the design was not implemented in the current iteration of the portal and has been marked for further investigation throughout 2018.

Challenges and limitations

The project was bounded by pragmatic considerations, including available funding, and human and technological resources. The funding of the project was time-bound to the calendar year, and subject to tight restrictions around spending. As a result, the project leads and other participating staff incorporated the project work into their existing workloads, and the project evolved to take a phased approach, with certain outcomes positioned to be developed further in 2018. Further, the project needed to work within the technological resources and platforms available at the institution, which placed some boundaries around the interface that was developed for the 2017 iteration.

A key objective of the project was the acquisition and incorporation of student feedback at various stages of design and development. Engaging students other than the student partners in the process proved difficult. Scheduled focus groups that were intended to inform the needs analysis and initial prototype failed to attract an appropriate number of participants. Acquiring feedback from students away from the University's Wollongong campus was limited due to budget constraints. As a result, the project team developed a flexible approach to acquiring student feedback, including a mix of informal (cookies for comment, informal conversations) and formal (focus groups, surveys) feedback mechanisms. The student partners were critical to ensuring the student voice consistently guided the project.

Catering to the needs of a diverse student cohort posed a significant challenge. The UOW cohort spans several countries, and includes a mix of international, domestic, regional and metropolitan students. A 'Wollongong-centric' if not 'Australia-centric' website and/or resources would prove useless for students studying away from main campus, who, ironically, are those who would benefit most from it. The project team used personas to empathise with these diverse cohorts, and identified themes that cut across the needs of several key demographics (Newton & Riggs 2016). These themes informed the design of the online portal, in conjunction with the feedback from students on main and regional campuses. A further iterative phase of the live prototype in 2018 will emphasise acquisition and incorporation of feedback from students on offshore, regional and metropolitan campuses.
Next steps

The development of a digital presence for the Learning Co-Op allowed the Learning Co-Op Member Service Providers to extend the reach of their physical services and pilot a collaborative and user-centred approach to online resource and service design that included the perspectives of UOW students and a range of professional services.

The portal is scheduled to launch in early 2018. In line with the iterative and user-centred approach adopted by the project, gathering feedback from the live website throughout the first part of 2018 will significantly inform the ongoing development of the portal. This evaluation will extend to incorporate the success of the Co-Op’s human-centred design approach and use of student partners. Also planned for 2018 is the expansion of the site to include virtual peer-consultations and a self-assessment tool.
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