

Transcript:

Episode Four: Running a Students' Union Virtually



Bethan: Hi my name's Bethan and I work in Student Support in the Students' Union

Gareth: Hi my name's Gareth and I'm the chief executive of the Students' Union

Kerrie: Hi my name's Kerrie and I work in the Marketing Department of the Students' Union

Bethan: So today, this episode is following the government announcement last night and it's all about us continuing in lockdown. So yeah, how do you guys feel about the government's decision last night?

Gareth: I guess from the personal perspective I guess it's not surprising news, it was the news I think everyone was expecting. I guess it's kind of the responsible thing because if you look at NHS figures they're still not amazing, and I think it's really important that people continue to do the right thing, they continue to stay at home as much as possible and stay safe, and look after themselves and their families. And I think the best way of doing that is to continue to listen to the government's advice and not to strain the NHS at this really awful time.

Kerrie: I think from a personal perspective as well that it is a really good decision, because I feel like if we had just released the lock down it would have seemingly gone back to Day 1 where everyone was unsure on what was going to happen.

Also, from the perspective of, although not everyone will be enjoying the lockdown and being away from their friends and stuff, in some ways it gives people that comfort that their family members will be safe if they follow the rules. Especially the older ones and the more vulnerable ones.

Bethan: Yeah, no, I agree completely. Obviously this is such a big change for all of us, I think everyone in the country can be proud of how they've been coping for the past three to four weeks now.

How do you guys feel things have been going in terms of lockdown, knowing now that the measures will be continuing forward?

Gareth: One of the things I do think needs to change going forward is, clearly I don't think the government can commit to specific dates, but it would be really nice if we had an idea of 'if this happens, this is how lockdown will end', I think a little bit of a sense of what will come next will be really useful.

I know from a personal perspective of managing my mental health that would really help me. At the moment while we know it's the right decision, not knowing



how long it will go on for is tough and knowing what would happen next would be really helpful. But I don't know if that makes me selfish for thinking that!

Kerrie: From a totally selfish perspective, it's my birthday at the end when lockdown has been extended to, so selfishly I want to know whether or not I will be spending my birthday in lockdown! I know a lot of people have spent their birthday in lockdown, but going forward and stuff just knowing how we are going to get out of this.

Bethan: No definitely, and I think something that's been going through my mind a lot as well is that lockdown is very different for different people. You know, there are some people who are very fortunate who have large gardens and whose family all lives together and they know that they are safe, and then there are lots of people whose family members may have been diagnosed with COVID and could be in hospital. Or people who are stuck in flats with no outside space and maybe living out of one room. And then obviously those as well who may be in unsafe situations.

So I think for those who don't have the home comforts that others are fortunate to have this might be quite worrying that they are having to continue this for a longer period and not knowing when it's going to stop.

Gareth: I completely agree!

Bethan: So thinking about lockdown and how we as a company are going to be developing over the upcoming weeks, or maybe even longer, what are the Students' Union's plans?

Gareth: It's fair to say that our Students' Union, alongside any Students' Union, weren't in a position where anyone had a plan for something like this, you know, a break opening case for a global pandemic. There's been an awful lot of trial and error from our side, and certainly as Chief Exec I've been so amazed by the stuff that the Student Officers and all the staff in the SU have done to respond to this.

We've been trying new things out, you know I've been loving the fact that there has been these fun things to do online, you know things like the quiz and these podcast series, that wouldn't have happened until this situation has arisen. It's almost created some creativity across the team in challenging us to do some of the things we've always done but in a different way and hopefully engage more people in doing that.

So, I guess to continue looking at those other Students' Unions, continue to look at charities who do similar work to what we do, taking ideas that they've got and continuing to do the brilliant work that we've already started.



Kerrie: It's just that online community that seems to be coming together! Beforehand we obviously had an online presence as a Students' Union and we had our social media channels, but it's just doing fun new things with that as well because there's a lot of hard news going on at the moment

Bethan: Yeah, Kerrie could you update our listeners on some of the more entertaining things we've been getting up to?

Kerrie: So we've been doing quite a few different things! So, we are currently in the pipeline in working with DSU to produce some healthy recipe videos because we know that a lot of people seem to enjoy their cooking and lots are becoming esteemed bakers during this lockdown. We've also got some stuff in the pipeline that's already going on, like our quiz – every Friday at 3pm – and we've also got our Facebook group Leics Quarantine and Chill where people have been posting some really cool stuff like playlists, videos, anything they've been enjoying. Loads of activities for you to get involved in!

Bethan: Yeah, it's important to add in here as well that obviously as an SU we are still operating all of our support services online during this period, we know that students still have the same issues in terms of wellbeing and academia, as they would do during a regular academic term, and obviously there is more stuff that has now cropped up through the quarantine period. So make sure you keep an eye out, on our website and social channels. Also, our Advice Service is still open to emails and Facebook live chats every week day 1pm-3pm every week day.

Kerrie: I do have a question actually for Gareth, obviously we are talking about the services still running and things like that, but you've been around student unions a long time haven't you? So I was wondering, how is it for being a CEO working in SU's for years, what is it like now compared to previous years? As this is totally out of the blue this pandemic! How would you say things have changed over the years in SU's?

Gareth: The one thing I'll say is the speed in which everything is popping up, and the key partners that are looking to make change for students, and getting good partners to make this happen. One of things recently coming into Advice, are student concerns around private sector housing, we were able to work really quickly with the University of Leicester and City Council to start getting letters out to agencies, to start getting letters out to private landlords, within a matter of days! Hopefully starting to get to see some of those wins.

What's crazy right now is these are a whole bunch of issues I've not seen of the past 17 years or so, no one's had to think about say how do you deliver a handover to a student group when they can't see each other and how do you support students in running events when they can't be here, and how do you support students with financial hardship matters when you would usually signpost students to getting part time work.



It's helping students come up with responses to challenges when most of the normal solutions just aren't there. It's fascinating, it's hard work though, I think the way students have responded to this has been amazing.

Bethan: Yeah no definitely it's been really admirable how many students have been able to adapt to this new way of life and go along with what us and the University are trying to do to help them.

Gareth: I think what also is important to say to students is the rights you have as a student are exactly the same right now as they would be within a normal world, so if there are aspects of your student experience that you aren't happy with then continue to alert the SU in the way you normally would do.

Kerrie: I think it's important as well to realise that although the SU is operating differently, it is still operating, it is still here for you. Especially online and stuff we are still trying to keep ourselves really present so that students know that anyone who has a problem can still reach out in some way.

Bethan: How do you both feel this is going to effect everything once things start to resume? So once quarantine is over and we are allowed back onto campus and the students are as well, do you feel there are going to be any major changes around the University and the SU?

Gareth: I think that it's inevitable that there is going to be, the really interesting things that students will start seeing will be some of the technological solutions the university were starting to come up with before the Easter break with teaching. Like how teaching can be recorded, how teaching can be made accessible to students with specific access needs, that haven't been made available in the past. All of a sudden now they are available.

I think some of the initiatives universities have shown within the past few months, we need to make sure we continue to work with them once normality does resume. And I think the same goes for us in the SU, we've come up with ways of trying to engage people who aren't on campus and we know a lot of our students don't come to campus every day so we need to push ourselves to not just run events in the Percy Gee Building or on campus, but doing things on campus as well as a digital space. I think that's the exciting opportunity that will come to the future! What about you Kerrie?

Kerrie: Well especially from a marketing point of view we have all these platforms and all these things to utilise and when the new term starts there are so many new things we can do in different ways. It's really exciting to see that for the students who don't want to be on campus all the time or maybe can't it's just really great to give them the opportunity the same as a student who spends every day on campus has to get involved.



And from your point of view Bethan, obviously you're a very recent Leicester graduate aren't you? How do you feel seeing the changes happen? You're a part of a long community going from a student to a staff member here.

Bethan: One thing I have noticed from the student community that I still know is that there are still a lot of students living in Leicester currently. I think the majority feel that most have gone home to live with their parents and that definitely isn't the case, particularly for final year students and post-grad students who were sticking around to finish things like dissertations.

So I think we've got to be mindful of that, and as I was saying before, for some students it is going to be a bit more difficult than others because they won't have that familiar support. For all we know people could have sick family members during this pandemic and hopefully we can be mindful of that over the upcoming weeks when creating support activities and things to uplift spirits.

There will have been a lot of people as well who would have planned to go on internships over the summer or gone away on things like Camp America, they would have had all these plans and even as you were saying before, even things like having a birthday, like it was my birthday a couple of weeks ago, there would have been loads of people in that position, and these are things that people look forward to! I think what people should understand during this period is that it's okay to feel sad about things.

Kerrie: Very true. I think from a final perspective, looking forward at the academic year 2020/21, if you're thinking of joining University of Leicester, Gareth as CEO, what can students expect from us in the next academic year?

Gareth: I think a big thing is that this year has given us a chance to analyse what we do and why we do it. I think that everything we've done in the past with Support, Representation and Opportunities, will come back even bigger and brighter having had this chance to reflect.

I will expect we will do even more stuff in a digital space as well as physical, more so than we have in the past, so that students off campus and students who are distant learners will get to see even more of us.

I expect us to be thinking even more carefully about some of those little problems that students aren't happy with such as claiming payments back. Moving more things to online processes so we can see quicker turnovers.

Bethan: What is the first thing you guys are hoping to do once lockdown has finished?

Gareth: It's probably not the first thing but the thing I'm looking forward to doing the most is seeing my nephew and my nieces. My family aren't really close by and I'm really looking forward to seeing them. It's not immediate either but



yesterday was supposed to be my sister's wedding day and that's had to be postponed to later in the year so when that happens I'm really looking forward to seeing my little sister get wed, because she's been looking forward to that for a really long time.

Kerrie: I'm really looking forward to seeing my Nan! She actually had heart surgery the day before, so I haven't been able to see her because she's been in a really vulnerable group, but also I had a couple of holidays planned! I was supposed to be going to Ibiza, and I was going to see my best mate in Berlin, so I'm hoping that day it's over I can get on the plane to Berlin and see my friend. What about you Bethan?

Bethan: Well, the very first thing probably go somewhere I can sit for a really long time outside because I am one of the people who in a flat with no outdoor space, so that's obviously something I've taken for granted in the past. So definitely that, but also give my Mum a hug! I haven't seen her now since early February, so I really miss her.

Kerrie: Thanks very much for joining us today guys, it's been really good chatting and we hope you look forward to future episodes, we've got so much planned for the Leics Quarantine and Chill podcast! You can also follow us on the social media platforms that are @LeicesterUnion on Twitter and Instagram.

Bethan: We also have our Advice Service page on Facebook where you can go and engage with the live chats, and our Twitter is @LeicsTrainingPM.

Gareth: Thanks a lot all! Take care, stay safe!

Kerrie: Bye!

Bethan: Bye!

