

Union Upgrade

1) Outline the project or initiative and what makes it innovative and inspiring (max 300 words).

Perth College Students' Union is located at the heart of campus, both physically and as a social hub. It attracts around 150 to 200 students each lunchtime, as well as a steady flow of students throughout the day.

However, the physical resources and furniture were no longer fit for purpose. This was affecting the student experience and students' feedback constantly made us aware of the need for change. Our aim was to re-invent the space as a welcoming, bright and funky relaxation area where students could enjoy time out from studies. That was not the only factor to consider: we were aware from student feedback that they needed more places for quiet study on campus.

This was the first time since the opening of the building that we had an opportunity to make major changes that would transform the Union space. We knew that upgrading the furniture would help, but that was only one part of our vision for the Union. We wanted our students to feel that the space was for them, a real student environment in a new city. It needed to be bright, fresh, current but practical and fit for purpose for the years ahead.

One huge part of our initiative was to be more inclusive. The Union had, for many years, hosted pool tables and games consoles. It attracted students, but from a much narrower cohort than we wanted, both in terms of FE to HE ratio and age and gender mix. Our vision was to create a Union where any student could come and spend their downtime: safe but fun; clean and tidy but relaxed; student-focussed but a 21st century décor.

We needed to change but would our research pay off?

2) Detail how the project or initiative was delivered, from the planning stage through to its successful conclusion (max 300 words). Include details of timing* and funding.

We are staff members with a passion for what we do. The student experience is at the core of our every working day. We put ourselves under a bit of healthy pressure to make this project the best it could be. This is what we did.

Firstly, through the planning process starting in spring we identified the changes we thought were needed to make to transform the two distinct areas of the Union: main area and computer suite. We knew our proposed changes were quite radical, but we had faith that they would deliver a better student experience for more students than ever before.

Starting with the computer suite, we identified the biggest problems as:

- the length of time it was taking to log on
- after waiting for a huge amount of time, students then only had 10 minutes of their allocated 30 minutes left
- the area itself was cold, draughty, unwelcoming and noisy.

We put in a bid to change the computers: done.

We asked for the log in times to be extended to 2 hours: done.

We asked for a partition to close off the area, prevent draughts and make it, as the students had requested, a quiet study area: done beyond our wildest dreams.

Then fate threw us a hand – the old furniture had woodworm, making replacement imperative, not just desirable. Our toughest challenge was picking colours and styles. We were given a budget of £20k. Within that amount we had to re-furbish every piece of furniture we had. The pressure was on: we had to select every item, decide on styles, colours, where it would all go; would it all fit, would it be enough to fill the space?

Finally, over the summer, the order was placed and we waited with baited breath.

3) Outline the project or initiative's outcome(s) within the university and beyond with relevant supporting evidence, metrics or testimony where appropriate (max 400 words).

We disposed of the old furniture over the holidays, and had an empty space in which to hold our very successful Freshers' Fair. We knew that the project timescale had to work for delivery of the new furniture otherwise the 2014/15 students would arrive and have nowhere to eat lunch or to relax with friends.

Thankfully, the new furniture arrived on time. We had ordered soft seating in 5 bright colours. The Union has an area of seating booths, and they were ordered in another further colour-scheme, with low level coffee-tables, rather than dining table height as before. When they arrived we had that tiny moment of doubt: would the students like the new style and look?

They loved it and we are still receiving positive feedback 4 months after the changes were implemented. We did have a few initial questions about the pool tables, but we had replaced them with analogue board games, chess, cards, scrabble and lots of others. We have a resident classical pianist (a student) who comes in to practice and entertains the students with his repertoire.

Since the start of semester one we have seen the Union revitalised. We now have students coming in that had never been into the Union before, and every curriculum area is represented. We have noticed a marked increase in the numbers of HE, mature and international students using the facility.

As for the computer suite, it is full to capacity every day. The partition (the one that went beyond our wildest dreams) was in fact a full glass partition. It blocks out noise but allows in light, and students can use the area without keeping their outdoor coat on. Students from Social and Vocational Studies through all of the FE and HE courses and up to masters programmes share the space daily.

Two final things that tell us a lot: hardly any rubbish is now left around; and staff come and visit us to see the new look.

Thanks for taking time to read our entry: we hope it inspires others.

Sam Monie and Jane Edwards

Student Union Staff Members at Perth College UHI