FOLLOW A DISTANCE STUDENT

RETHINK:KAU AND THE CENTRE FOR TEACHING AND LEARNING, 2020

KAU.SE

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SUMMARY

In 2020, a project called "Follow a distance student" has been conducted at Karlstad University. The project is based on service design methods and follows the experiences of distance students at Karlstad University. Similar projects have been conducted at the University before — "Follow a student", "Follow a teacher", and "Follow a new employee" to name a few. The intent has been to focus on user perspective in order to identify areas of improvement.

The purpose of "Follow a distance student" was to develop distance learning at Karlstad University based on student experiences and needs.

The project was funded within the scope of the Swedish Council for Higher Education's call for proposals for the quality-enhancement of distance learning. The project has been conducted by Re-think:Kau[1] and the Centre for Teaching and Learning[2]. Several criteria were established to select the student participants for the project. The students should live in Värmland or Dalsland, but not in the municipalities of Karlstad and Hammarö, and be enrolled as distance students, preferably in teacher education. The group that is followed comprises 30–40 students.

Emails were sent out in early January 2020 to active distance students who matched the selection criteria. The emails contained a description of the project plan and an invitation to participate. 30 distance students expressed an interest in getting involved.

The project recorded the experiences of the distance students using service design methods and the experiences were then visualised in an illustration. The student experiences were mined to identify needs and a great number of ideas were generated for how to address them. The project focused on two development tracks to address student needs and develop distance learning at Karlstad University — *Keep up with Kau — Distance* and *Keep up with distance learning — Teachers.*

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[1] https://www.kau.se/en/rethink
[2] https://www.kau.se/en/about-university/about-karlstad-university/our-responsibility/centre-teaching-and-learning

"FOLLOW A DISTANCE STUDENT"

The University works with continuous organisational development, in part intended to optimise user experience. The project titled "Follow a distance student" was conducted in 2020 and focused on distance students. We implemented the "Follow a..." method, which is based on research and practical application in service design and was created by Rethink:Kau at Karlstad University. The project aspired to generate a comprehensive view of user experience, irrespective of which service or study programme the student is in contact with. The "Follow a..." method helped lay the foundation for a holistic overview of student experiences and needs, and this information was used to initiate improvements to address student needs.

Background

In October 2019, Rethink:Kau and the Centre for Teaching and Learning applied for funding following a call for proposals by the Swedish Council for Higher Education aimed at quality-enhancement of distance learning.

The application stated the project's intention to use the "Follow a..." method to follow a number of distance students living in rural areas, survey their experiences with distance learning, and analyse their needs. With a clear idea of the needs, it is time to develop teaching, technological teaching aids, and other educational improvements. Previous studies and follow-ups regarding completion and drop-out rates in academic studies show that distance students experience their studies differently and encounter different obstacles than on-campus students. A 2019 survey targeting Karlstad University students with registered addresses in the municipalities of Arvika and Eda supports this view. However, it is very important not to define any impactful factors for student experiences before the project has even begun. The "Follow a distance student" project was granted SEK 1 million to be conducted in 2020.

Purpose and aim

The intent behind "Follow a distance student" was to develop the distance learning at Karlstad University. Service design methods would be used to follow the students in their daily lives with the purpose of creating an understanding for student experiences and needs. The experiences and needs would inform suggestions on how to adjust the systems and processes connected to distance learning as well as the teaching. The project would also conduct development of teaching, technology, or teaching technology based on the acquired experiences and needs.

Invitation and selection

To achieve the project aims, a minimum of 20 and a maximum of 40 student participants were needed to continuously describe their experiences.

Email invitations were sent to Karlstad University distance students based on the following criteria:

- First priority — distance students enrolled in teacher education at Karlstad University and with registered addresses in Värmland and Dalsland, but not in the municipalities of Karlstad and Hammarö.

- Second priority — distance students enrolled in study programmes at Karlstad University and with registered addresses in Värmland and Dalsland, but not in the municipalities of Karlstad and Hammarö.

- Third priority — distance students enrolled in study programmes at Karlstad University and with registered addresses elsewhere than the major cities of Stockholm, Gothenburg, and Malmö.

This was the email that was sent out:

Hello!

Would you like to help develop distance learning at Karlstad University?

Karlstad University is launching a project called "Follow a distance student" with the purpose of developing distance learning at Karlstad University. We are looking for participants who are active distance students at Karlstad University and are registered in Värmland or Dalsland (but not in the municipalities of Karlstad and Hammarö).

The project's student participants will share their experiences with distance studies by keeping a diary for five weeks. It is very simple, and it is up to you whether to elaborate in your entries or keep them brief. Share whatever you want! You can also take pictures, make videos, or meet with the project team to share your experiences. How much you share and how you go about it is up to you. Participants will spend approximately 30 minutes per week on the project. Once all the students in the project have shared their experiences, we will keep working together to identify the needs of your student group and come up with solutions.

Based on the recorded experiences and identified needs, developments of teaching, technology, or teaching technology will be implemented.

Your experiences, thoughts, and needs matter to us! Take the opportunity to join our project and tell us what you need to succeed in your studies at Karlstad University. After signing up, you will receive more information about the project and an invitation to a briefing early in the spring semester.

Sign up now via *https://www.kau.se/rethink/studier/folj-en-distansstudent*
The sign-up deadline is Friday 24 January.

If you have any questions, please contact project manager Sandra Berginge: 070-882 14 80 or foljen@kau.se.

Kind regards
Sandra Berginge
Project manager

Signing up

The email to the students included a sign-up link and 30 distance students signed up for the project. The students are from different distance programmes. Many are enrolled in teacher education, but there are also students from the Faculty of Health, Science and Technology and the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences.

The project team organised a digital initial meeting to brief the participants about the aim and purpose of the project. An email summarising the meeting was also sent out to ensure that all participants were given the same information about the project.

Recording experiences

The project has employed service design methods to create an idea of what it is like to be a distance student at Karlstad University.

The project has sent weekly emails to the participants. The purpose has been to stay in touch with the students and show that their participation is crucial to the University's chances of developing distance learning. Example from the emails that were sent to the students:

The project has not included any specific questions for the students, such as "How do you feel about using Canvas?" Instead, students have been able to freely record their experiences based on the concept of "How are you doing?"

Diary

An online form was used to enable students to write diary entries about their experiences and submit them to the project.

Rethink:Kau Follow a distance student

First and last name*

Experience*

Attachments
Browse...
Add more

Submit

The form only has two mandatory boxes to fill out, all to make it easier for the students to complete and submit. 153 diary entries have been submitted via the online form. To enable the project to sort

the experiences by person and use them to inform the conversations that follow, student submissions have not been anonymous.

Conversations

Three weeks into the project students were offered the chance to video chat with two project team members and share their experiences. The project used the term "conversation" rather than "interview". The reason was that "interview" could be associated with requirements and questions that had to be answered. The purpose of the conversation was to use the student's recorded experiences to gain a deeper understanding. Conversations have been conducted with 12 students.

Example of an email that was sent to the students:

> *Schedule a conversation*
>
> *The project team would love to have a conversation with you about your experiences — if you're up for it! The conversations will take place on Zoom. A link will be sent to those of you who schedule a chat.*
>
> *Use the link below to reserve a slot that works for you between 24 February and 15 March:*
>
> *https://doodle.com/poll/ediy9kiyef4dn2cu*

Pictures

Students were given the opportunity to upload pictures with captions to the digital diary. The idea was to use image and text to convey the experiences of a distance student at the University. 41 pictures were sent in, some of which are included in the "Findings" section.

Workshop

In April 2020, the student participants were invited to join a workshop. Various University employees involved in distance learning were also invited. The purpose of the workshop was to discuss experiences, identify needs, and generate ideas for how to address those needs. Six students and eleven employees attended the workshop. Another workshop scheduled at Lärcentrum in Arvika had to be cancelled due to corona-related restrictions.

FINDINGS

Recorded experiences in the form of diary entries, conversations, and pictures from students have been processed by the project team to provide an idea of the students' experiences. The material recorded is visualised in an illustration of experiences.
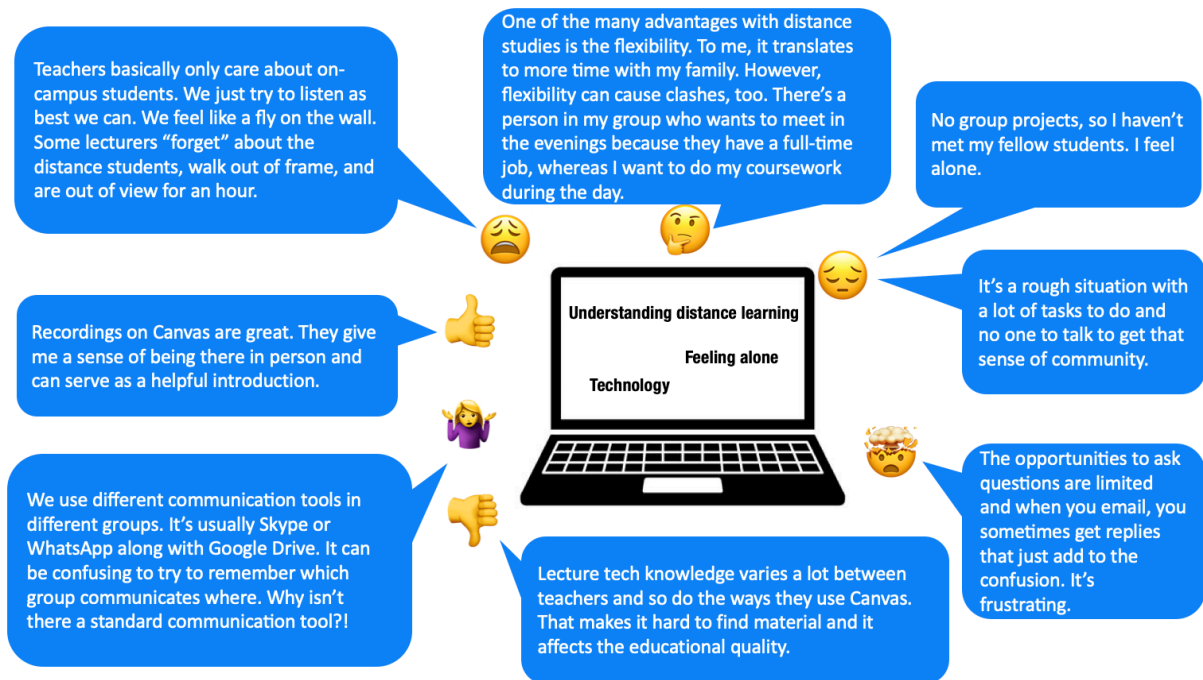
Three impactful areas

The student experiences revealed three impactful areas in terms of the students' ability to complete their studies: "Feeling alone", "Technology", and "Understanding distance learning".

Feeling alone

The student experiences reveal that they feel alone in various ways. One aspect is the lack of a social context, another is feeling isolated in their studies without the possibility of running things by their fellow students, and a third is connected to the teachers. Several students say that they have not gotten to know any fellow students and that they feel alone in a social and an academic sense. Students mention stress connected to not being able to talk to a fellow student about what is required for a certain written report or to get a handle on where they are in terms of revision before an exam. Several students who had attended on-campus meetings hailed them as significantly positive. Having the opportunity to meet and get to know fellow students makes it easier to reach out digitally and that dispels some of the loneliness.

Another form of feeling alone is related to teachers. Many students compare their situation to what it would have been like on campus when students and teachers meet in the classroom. The student then has the option to stay behind after a lecture or stop by the teacher's office to ask a follow-up question that they were not comfortable asking in front of the whole class. Distance students say that teachers tend to end lectures or other digital meetings by asking, "Are there any questions?"

Students are not always comfortable asking questions in front of the class, and thoughts and questions sometimes do not come up until some time after the lecture is over. That often leaves email as the only way to communicate with the teacher. Not knowing when to expect an answer to their question can trigger feelings of being alone in the students.

Technology

The student experiences revealed another impactful factor for study completion, and that was distance learning technology. The teacher's use of technology, the educational purpose behind the technology selection, and the teacher's digital prowess all influence student experiences. Students say that when a teacher seems insecure about technology, it affects their overall confidence in the teacher's knowledge of the discipline. Students also say that understanding the layout and structure of the learning platform Canvas is a key factor. They encounter varying course structures in Canvas, which causes uncertainty about whether they really have all the information they need. Concern about missing out on learning materials or information about important dates is a source of stress and the result of variations in how individual teachers use Canvas structures.

Many students also record negative experiences that result from stress related to communication tools. Different groups use different digital communication tools, which also causes stress and concern about potentially missing information. The students would like to see a standard communication tool provided by the University.

Understanding distance learning

A third area that emerges from the student experiences as an impactful factor for study completion is the students' own understanding and expectations of the study programme.

The University offers several forms of distance learning, and the course structures are not always clear to the students. Some courses have mandatory components to carry out with other students, others do not and instead allow the student to plan their own studies. Some courses include on-campus meeting where students are expected to attend, and some courses include no physical meetings. Some courses provide video recordings before and after lectures, while others require real-time attendance from the students. In some courses, teachers sometimes give lectures to on-campus students and distance students simultaneously. There are many variations of distance learning, and the student experiences clearly show that a disconnect between expectations and reality is a source of frustration and negative experiences. If a student does not understand why they cannot access recorded lectures or someone who planned to study in the evenings instead has to study during the day because of a group project, it creates frustration and negative experiences that affect the students' ability to complete their studies.

Experiences in picture form
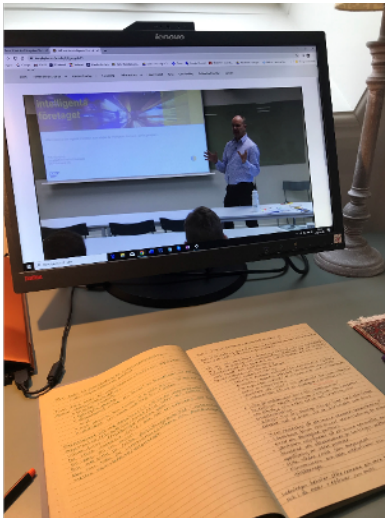
"I'm always happy to find recordings on Canvas. Not every course provides them, but they give me a sense of being there in person and can serve as a helpful introduction"
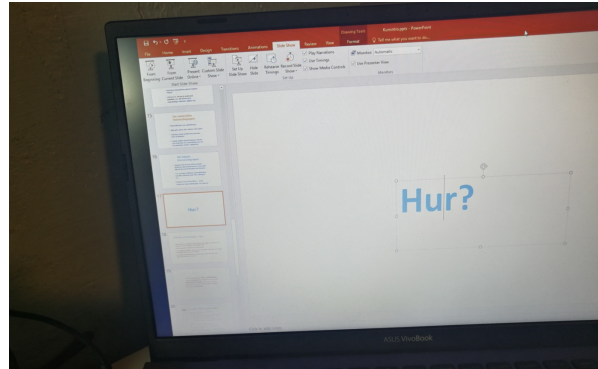
"Course introduction for Swedish. Another lecturer who is not proficient in Zoom. This is starting to feel familiar."

"One of the many advantages with distance studies is the flexibility. To me, it translates to more time with my family, because I can get more little chores done during the day that I would otherwise do in the evenings or on weekends. I definitely think our quality of life has improved since I got the opportunity to be a distance student, and I absolutely think it should be offered and developed more"
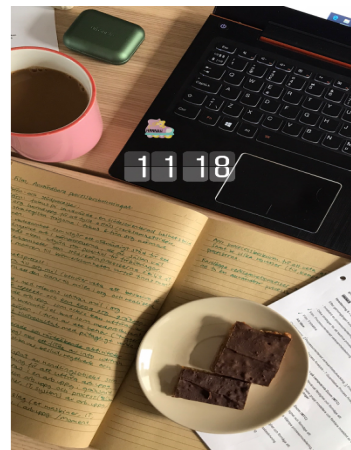
"During my studies, I've developed a rigorous routine for studying. I have set times for things. Since I've got kids that need me in the afternoons, I have to be super efficient during the days. Here's a picture of my slightly late elevenses."

"Just had a spring break holiday abroad with the family. When you've got teenagers, they can't take time off during the semester. Amazing that I was still able to study to the extent that I wanted to, using the app or the computer. Whatever I didn't feel like doing or didn't have time for, I could just catch up on back home thanks to video recordings and uploaded presentations"

"The laptop is basically the most important tool, especially to a distance student. The despair when it decides to stop working. I've borrowed my son's computer but I know I have to got a new one.. I've been OK this past week but I realised the importance of video and audio quality when you have a lot of Skype meetings. No one has heard a word I said all week. Feels limiting.."

Needs and ideas

In April 2020, a workshop was conducted where students and staff worked together to identity and formulate student needs based on the recorded experiences. Informed by those needs, the participants collaborated on ideas for how to address the students' needs with the purpose of developing distance learning at Karlstad University.

Needs

When I struggle to find the right documents or assignment instructions…
…I need more structure, clarity, and cohesion from course to course on Canvas.
...I need a checklist or to-do list with items to tick off.
...I need a task overview.

When I feel like I need to talk to somebody (counsellor/student health services)…
…I need to feel that I have the same/similar opportunities as an on-campus student.

When I experience a video broadcast to be one-way communication...
...I need to be able to see it when it suits me, so it has to be recorded.

When I am not sure about how the examination will be carried out…
…I need more structure and information about on-campus and at-home exams and their execution, and group discussions about various interpretations.

When I feel like I can't find the time for the group project…
...I need to adapt to the other group members, sometimes by using Zoom in the evenings or using Messenger for swift communication.

When I feel the need for quick feedback...
...I need quick confirmation that my question has been received.

When I feel the need to sort something out with my group…
...I need the knowledge or tools to accomplish that in a virtual environment.

Ideas

Informed by the recorded experiences and identified needs, many ideas were generated for how to address the students' needs with the purpose of developing distance learning.

These are a few examples of the ideas that were generated:

- Courses on how to foster a sense of community and connection between students.

- Opportunities for on-campus meetings.

- Improving the standard, helping teachers become more tech-savvy!

- A shared basic structure on Canvas.

- Skills development to help lecturers in teacher training with distance learning.

- More distance education pedagogy training for teachers.

- A more comprehensive induction — introduction to the programmes, the University, and the resources at the students' disposal.

- Synchronous and asynchronous instruction complementing each other.

In the autumn of 2020, the project focused on two distance education development tracks based on student experiences and needs, and on the ideas generated.

- Keep up with Kau — Distance

- Keep up with distance learning — Teachers.

Keep up with Kau — Distance

Keep up with Kau — Distance is an interactive tool designed to help students better grasp what distance studies entail and what kind of support is offered by the University in terms of studies and community. The contents of *Keep up with Kau — Distance* are divided into six areas that have been created based on student experiences and needs in terms of feeling alone, technology use, and understanding distance learning. *Keep up with Kau — Distance* lets the user browse short videos and texts to find out more about the support and help available at the University. *Keep up with Kau — Distance* was launched on the University website, www.kau.se, in conjunction with admissions for the 2021 spring semester.

KOLL PÅ KAU - DISTANS

Koll på Kau - Distans är ett interaktivt verktyg med syfte att skapa trygghet för dig som distansstudent vid Karlstads universitet. Du kan navigera bland korta filmer och informationstexter för att få veta mer om olika former av stöd och hjälp som universitetet erbjuder.

Plugga på distans · Teknik · Närträffar · Studenthälsan · Studie- och karriärvägledning · Biblioteket

Alla filmer har undertexter på svenska och engelska.

Image 1: Image of Keep up with Kau — Distance as presented on kau.se.

Distance learning aims to inform students that the University offers several kinds of distance studies, all with their own requirements and structures. Encouraging students to find out what their course entails is an important part of ensuring that student expectations are more in line with the structure of their studies.

The area titled *Digital tools* is focused on clarifying which IT services the students need to be familiar with when the course starts and on information about the types of digital support offered.

On-campus meetings is intended to describe the nature and practical components of an in-person meeting. The purpose is also to highlight the value of participation and the opportunity to meet fellow students and teachers as a way to avoid feelings of isolation.

The areas titled Student health services, Study and career guidance, and University library focus on information about different forms of support, including those available to distance and on-campus students alike.

Keep up with distance learning — Teachers

Keep up with distance learning — Teachers is a professional skills development package created for teachers. It includes quick workshops and limited courses and the purpose is to boost teachers' instructional skills in terms of distance teaching and appropriate technology. *Keep up with distance learning — Teachers* is based on student experiences and needs and has been included in the range of services offered to University teaching staff by the Centre for Teaching and Learning since the autumn 2020. The different workshops are distinctly connected to the three student experience areas and highlight the importance of enabling social relationships, clear overviews, and training in digital tools used for distance learning.

The workshops all take place once to twice a month on Zoom. The workshops are announced on the University's intranet calendar, last no more than an hour, and do not require prior registration — all to make it as simple as possible for teachers to attend.

The following workshops have been created within the scope of *Keep up with distance learning — Teachers.*

- Practical online instruction and how to do it in Canvas.

- Conducting distance examinations.

- Quiz on Canvas — turning ideas into practice.

- Planning, conducting, and following up on individual written take-home exams.

- The voice as a tool in lectures, both online and on campus.

- Introduction to Padlet.

- Screencast-O-Matic.

- Large groups on Zoom.

In addition to the workshops, the Centre for Teaching and Learning has increased their commitment to the course *Open Networked Learning,* an international web-based course about online teaching. With its innovative layout, the course centres on problem-based learning (PBL) in small groups of six to eight teachers. The PBL groups have two supervisors on hand to usher the participants through the learning process. A more thorough description of the course will be published later this year in Professor Stefan Hrastinski's anthology titled *Designing Courses with Digital Technologies – Insights and Examples from Higher Education.*

Keep up with distance learning — Teachers was very well received by the teachers, meaning it is beneficial to the University's students. The following piece of teacher feedback illustrates this:

> *"Thank you, everyone at the Centre for Teaching and Learning who so brilliantly supported the teaching staff this autumn in our efforts to get better at digital instruction! At the start of the semester, my discipline got a crash course on how to clarify Canvas structure and how to create sustainable learning for students and teachers to help everyone make it all the way through the semester. Additionally, I've received help several times via Keep on Teaching and in the form of separate Padlet instructions. For my course, I used the suggestion for weekly information on Canvas as a way to make communications more clear. I also implemented Mentimeter exercises, Padlet usage, and several breakout room exercises in my work with students. Things were hectic and frantic at the start of the semester, but your support has consistently been outstanding! Oral student course evaluations revealed that the evening course to be a weekly highlight for the students, to the extent that they actually prioritised the course despite work, travels, and other studies specifically because it was so rewarding. Interactivity played a major role in that!"*

Communication and management of project findings

The project and its findings have been communicated internally at the University as well as externally during the autumn of 2020. The project and its findings have been presented at the annual Centre for Teaching and Learning conference about teaching and examination themed *The transition online*

from campus, to the Western Swedish Network for Flexible Learning, for smaller groups at the University and other higher education institutions, and more.

In January 2021, the digital tool, *Keep up with Kau — Distance,* was handed over to the Karlstad University communications office, who will keep developing the tool based on input and feedback from students. The skills development package, *Keep up with distance learning — Teachers,* is now managed by the Centre for Teaching and Learning.

CONCLUSIONS FROM A SERVICE DESIGN PROCESS

In a study where user experience informs the understanding of needs, it is important to reflect on the selection of methods and how they influence the findings. This project has prioritised the consistent emphasis throughout on distance student autonomy in terms how they submit their experiences. The students have chosen to submit their experiences in different ways and the project team has been active in their efforts to understand the students' submission preferences. Another prioritised part of the project method has been not to ask the students specific questions. The basic idea has been to ask the students how they are doing and how things are working out for them as distance students at Karlstad University. This is key in ensuring that the project team does not influence the project findings.

Some students wrote more elaborate diary entries once a week, others wrote shorter entries several times a week. Some students only submitted one or two text entries but participated in conversations. Freedom in terms of submission form is a success factor for this type of project.

The project made the deliberate choice to conduct *conversations* and not call them *interviews.* The purpose of this is connected to the aim of making the students feel at ease knowing there is no pressure to perform within the project. The word conversation was chosen with a view to lowering the bar and emphasising the point of the conversations: To talk about the students' experiences and gain a deeper level of understanding of the situation for distance students at Karlstad University. Ahead of each conversation, the individual students submitted experiences that informed the conversation. The students then felt that their submitted experiences were received and used, which may have encouraged them to submit more experiences.

Visualisation through an illustration of experiences very clearly describes the students' experiences. The workshop that was organised for students and University staff used the illustration as an entry point for the identification of needs and generation of ideas for how to address those needs.