

The social university: delivering business benefit through online networking

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1. ABSTRACT

This paper encourages senior management teams to adopt a strategic approach to university use of social media.

Social media tools have a user base of millions and are increasingly used by universities but often in an *ad hoc* fashion. There are examples of good use of social media for business activities including student recruitment, induction, learning and teaching, research, delivering IT customer service, alumni relations and other areas.

However, universities have not yet been able to embed pockets of good practice into more strategic approaches that meet particular needs. Many have been swept along by a global trend without being clear what they want to achieve using social media. There are more HE courses on developing a social media strategy than there are university social media strategies!

The time is right to be more visionary in approach and more tactical in the use of particular tools. Senior management teams need understanding of the opportunities and risks to provide leadership and ensure this type of engagement delivers the desired benefits.

A strategic approach doesn't mean your university's social presence will become bland and corporate but rather that you can use new tools to enhance the core activities of a scholarly community.

2. INTRODUCTION

This paper outlines the need for senior management teams to adopt a strategic approach to the use of social media by their universities.

Social media is a general term for a range of internet-based applications that allow people to create, co-create, share and interact with information. The scale of use of these tools is phenomenal with the most popular applications having many millions of active users worldwide. Use of such tools within universities is already common and is increasing. However, awareness of the benefits and risks associated with use of such tools is generally lowest amongst senior staff who have responsibility for corporate governance.

The paper draws on guidance in a Toolkit published by UCISA in 2015 for UK universities (UCISA 2015). The Toolkit recognises that good use of social media requires effective collaboration across many different functional areas of the institution including: senior management; marketing; IT; learning and teaching; legal and student support and, hence, the full Toolkit contains specific guidance for different types of user. Here we look specifically at the key messages for senior management teams.

The paper is specifically concerned with the higher education context and how this differs from the use of such tools in other types of organisations. It looks at social media from a perspective of corporate governance in higher education thus it is not a guide to the use of specific tools and nor is it limited to the use of such tools for learning and teaching purposes.

3. MAKING THE MOST OF THE OPPORTUNITIES

There is strong evidence that the effective use of social media is delivering considerable benefits across all aspects of university activities. To take but a few examples:

- Students are making contact with their peers through university networks before arriving on campus, and in some cases even prior to application, aiding recruitment and retention.
- Researchers are engaging in action research and communicating about their research using such tools.
- Students are using the tools to develop and demonstrate their competence in skills required for the world of work.
- Universities are using the tools to reach, interact, and work collaboratively with a range of audiences and using such public engagement to show the value of their activities in relation to the wider economy and society.
- Social tools are changing the nature of internal communications between university services and their customers.
- Social media tools are being used effectively to enhance learning and teaching practice such as examples of their use to support peer review, peer support, collaborative working and enhancing learning in large group settings.
- Social networks offer another channel to engage with university alumni.

There are short case studies on all of these types of benefits in our Toolkit.

The cultural trend implied by use of such tools is a significantly different and more social relationship between higher education providers and their stakeholders. The university is more of a knowledge hub than an ivory tower. Communications are likely to be more rapid and less formal. In using social media as part of your official channels of communication you will need to ensure you can both manage and meet user expectations.

With current tools it is very easy to innovate and experiment, but it is worth investing a little time in understanding the spirit of each tool's user community. Much authentic engagement will evolve quite naturally and organically, and you may indeed take the community in new directions, but managing a corporate presence does require a certain degree of planned effort and dedicated staff time. Such communications can be very cost effective but they do need to be resourced. You cannot expect staff to engage in social media communications on top of everything else they already do.

4. PRACTICAL APPROACHES

4.1. Defining a strategy

We suggest the use of social media is a strategic issue that requires senior level commitment but do you actually need a social media strategy?

The answer is that you probably don't need a separate strategy so long as you are thinking strategically and know how the use of social media fits with your institutional mission. Ensure the senior management team discusses the role that social media could play in underpinning your institutional values and supporting your particular mission. Also ensure that your use of these tools is aligned with other important institutional planning documents. For example have your overarching information and communications strategies been updated to take account of these new forms of communication?

However, if your institution is taking its first steps with social media, then you might find it useful to a separate (possibly short-term) strategy and action plan to make the most of the opportunities and clarify how you will measure that benefits realisation is actually taking place.

4.2. Defining a policy

In order to meet your responsibilities with regard to corporate governance you will need some form of policy on the use of social media by your staff and students.

Many universities have social media policies and they vary considerably in their approach - possibly because different universities have given different departments responsibility for this area. Such policies may be 'owned' by departments of marketing, communications and external relations; human resources; or information services. You need to think about who has the expertise to devise such a policy and also the role of policy as an *enabler* versus a means to deal with misconduct.

Smithers (2012) discusses the issues associated with university social media policies being developed by people with backgrounds in other industries, who have been brought in for this purpose, and who do not really understand how scholarly communities operate. He suggests this results in policies that are developed without enough vision for what could be achieved and which are taking protectionist and damage-limitation approaches, restricting the opportunities to innovate and collaborate.

Universities employ a wide-ranging body of staff many of whom have legitimate reasons to use social media in support of their professional practice. In other cases, however, staff may spend an excessive amount of work time on social media activity that is not work-related or exhibit behaviours that would seem incompatible with the pastoral care of students. Too much emphasis on penalising misconduct can result in a policy that is negative in tone and discourages staff from making the most of opportunities.

A practical approach is to indicate the level of social media activity you might expect a particular job role to entail - a spectrum might range from neutral (not expected to participate on behalf of the business) through to encouraged (not a requirement but can be beneficial and guidance available) to expected (a normal part of the role).

The message here is the need to ensure that policies act as enablers to delivering the benefits of social media as well as effectively managing the risks. It may be a good idea to frame your policy to be as much about institutional values as about rules. It is also beneficial to involve a range of stakeholders in drawing up/reviewing the policy in order to gain buy-in and help determine what is reasonable in different contexts (bearing in mind that different departments may have different cultures within a single university).

Our Toolkit contains a lot of good practice guidance on this topic.

4.3. Choosing the right tools

The choice of which tools to use is a significant one. There are many tools available and fashions change rapidly. Particular tools often appeal to a certain demographic so in order to interact effectively you need to understand how the social media channels you adopt are perceived by your target audience(s). You also need to consider what type of interactions your students will feel it appropriate to have with a learning provider via social channels. The higher education student and staff population is a very diverse community and it would be overly simplistic to stereotype attitudes to social media.

Universities also need to consider the international dimension of their activities. Social networks and other tools that are popular in Europe may be little used, or even banned, in some key target overseas markets such as China and other parts of Asia.

Currently there is a lot of thought being given to reputation management on social media but less evidence of effort being put into looking at how information flows via social networks support all aspects of the student lifecycle. The ad hoc addition of tools in an organic fashion can lead to confusion on the part of staff and students about which tools to use for which purposes. The difficulty at an institutional level is therefore getting the right balance between tools that are readily available to you (and possibly already familiar to your staff) and tools that your students prefer to use, bearing in mind that you may have a diverse student population and a set of younger users whose habits and preferences change quite frequently.

A few practical suggestions:

- View social media as part of service delivery - think about your stakeholders and their needs and preferences. A service design approach and the use of individual user stories or personas can help (see Baranova *et al* 2010).
- Look at the fit with IT infrastructure - consider the possible tools in relation to their compatibility with your other infrastructure.

- Solve real world problems - for example, consider whether social media tools might address issues due to students not reading email?
- Be inclusive - ensure that the tools you use are accessible to the widest possible range of potential users.
- Look at total cost of ownership - consider the total cost of the various options available, bearing in mind that tools free at the point of use may require chargeable customisation and that some tools may have cost implications in terms of the guidance and/or training needed.

4.4. Staying legal

At first sight the range of legal issues that need to be considered when using social media is quite daunting. In practice however there is nothing significantly new about any of this. The relevant legislation has been in place for some time and universities already have well established procedures for ensuring compliance in other areas of their activity. The basic need is to undertake a review of your policies and guidance. Ensure that they take account of the use of social media and include relevant examples to help clarify the issues for staff and students. Simply having policies and guidelines is not enough, however - in order for them to be effective you must communicate them well to all of your users.

Our Toolkit takes you through a few examples where less familiar issues may arise including:

Copyright and intellectual property rights (IPR) Universities are generally very well aware of their responsibilities in these areas but issues can arise due to the ease of capturing and sharing information on social media. Copyright and IPR do exist in the virtual world and the laws are basically the same but they are easier to infringe and to detect! In some cases, the issues can be quite complex e.g. a single piece of multimedia content may actually consist of a number of different layers with different ownership and there may be multiple contributors to content on blogs and wikis. It can often be quite difficult to determine who owns content and in which country's jurisdiction the content was generated. There is also a lack of clarity of what may be permitted under exceptions to copyright because of a lack of suitable case law e.g. in the field of data and text mining.

Our advice is to apply common sense and existing good practice. When using content produced by staff you need to think about whether or not the content was produced as part of their duties of employment, and when using content produced as part of an inter-institutional project you need to think about having a consortium agreement that defines how that content can be used. You may also wish to use the student-generated content on social media, either as learning resources or to showcase other aspects of the student experience, and you should ensure that you have the appropriate consent to do so. Note also that whilst reproduction by a student as part of their learning may fall within a copyright exemption, reproduction of the same material by the institution as part of their marketing may not.

Data protection and privacy Particular care needs to be taken with regard to the sharing of images and video clips where individuals are recognisable, as this may infringe on an individual's right to privacy (as defined by Article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights) as well as data protection legislation. Personal data must be fairly and lawfully processed and learners should be informed about all uses of their personal data and consent to that use. Institutions should also be aware that individuals captured on audio or video undertaking activities such as singing, dancing, acting, miming, reading aloud or even simply giving a lecture may be covered by performers' rights and their explicit consent will be required to publish the video clip or podcast. The [Web2Rights](#) project established that even avatars recorded in virtual worlds can acquire performers' rights.

Most European countries have stringent data protection laws. The UK Data Protection Act makes special provision in relation to sensitive personal data: this comprises data about a person's religious beliefs as well as personal data relating to racial or ethnic origin, political opinions, membership of trade union organisations, physical or mental health, sexual life and offences or alleged offences. Whenever processing sensitive personal data, explicit consent is required and additional safeguards should be in place. Social networks that support student societies may therefore process sensitive personal data. The ease of combining data from different sources may also mean that personal data

or sensitive personal data, whilst anonymous in its original source, can be aggregated with other data such that individuals are identifiable.

International law Many social media tools are available worldwide and support for international recruitment and international research is indeed part of their appeal for universities. This does however mean that if content infringes a law in another country then those making the content available could be sued in that other country. As an example, copyright materials that could be made available under the US fair use provisions may fall foul of UK copyright law where the boundaries are more narrowly drawn. As an example it is possible for a wiki to be built up by a number of contributors across the world: each may have diligently followed local laws but some may have ended up doing things that would have been illegal in UK law.

It is illegal to import something from another country which would be infringing copyright had the act in question been carried out in your country. Thus a wiki host could be liable for illegal content that was incorporated in good faith by a third party in another country. Defamation laws may also vary from country to country. Whilst the risks are real, actual examples of cross-border cases going to court are extremely rare (one of the most notable examples was the French state blocking the sale of Nazi memorabilia via Yahoo).

Research ethics Another area that is specific to our particular environment is the opportunities offered by social media to help in carrying out research. Universities should provide guidance on the use of social media in research and ensure that ethics policies are updated to cover research conducted using social media.

Our Toolkit offers common sense guidance on all of these issues and other areas such as the posting of inappropriate content by students or staff.

4.5. Academic freedom

Given the nature and values of the higher education environment, it is unsurprising that matters relating to academic freedom and freedom of speech are particularly prevalent and contentious in relation to the use of social media. From the university perspective the issues relate to the extent to which the institution might be held legally responsible for the actions of its staff and students in the 'virtual world' and the extent to which such actions reflect on the image of the institution.

Situations where online behaviours go beyond the bounds of normal acceptability to the extent they are illegal and/or constitute harassment of others should be covered by statute and policy. There are however many more grey areas, where the right to express certain opinions using certain social media channels is more contentious.

Academic blogging, and other forms of commentary via social media, is one of the more contentious areas. Debates about academic freedom are nothing new, but potentially controversial opinions that were previously restricted to a limited journal readership now have a much wider audience and frequently receive considerable media attention, as do comments made by academics about universities.

It is a moot point to what extent institutions would wish to control the use of social media by staff and students. Attempts to do so may simply drive criticism underground to other channels or behind the screen of anonymity. There is a need to clarify where professional ends and private begins, and to be clear about what constitutes inappropriate behaviour. It is equally clear that promoting and supporting examples of good practice is as important as defining what will not be tolerated.

Our Toolkit looks at the issues in more detail and provides guidance including:

- Define your context - relate your approach to social media to your existing position in an institution that has a legal responsibility to promote freedom of speech and academic freedom.
- Be value-driven - emphasise your institutional values in guidance for staff and students.
- Keep it simple - if you choose to have a policy, do not make it complicated – a simple policy of advising people not to say or do anything online that they would not do offline can suffice as guidance, as for example in these quotes from UCISA (2014) Model Regulations:

"Real world standards of behaviour apply online and on social networking platforms, such as Facebook, Blogger and Twitter."

"You must not cause needless offence, concern or annoyance to others."

"The way you behave when using IT should be no different to how you would behave under other circumstances. Abusive, inconsiderate or discriminatory behaviour is unacceptable."

4.6. DEALING WITH PROBLEMS

Despite the enormous benefits of social media in many aspects of everyday life, the tools, like so many others, have the potential to be misused. The [BBC](#) in June 2014 reported that 50% of calls passed on to front-line police now involve crimes originating from misuse of social media. Other forms of cybercrime are also on the increase (and are indeed opening up as a whole new subject area in many universities). Universities need to understand the issues and be proactive about preventing them.

Behaviours that may constitute bullying or harassment can take a variety of forms. Various terms have been coined to describe behaviours that specifically relate to the use of social media: creeping, stalking, trolling and ratting are all discussed in our Toolkit. Online bullying and harassment is often carried out by the same types of perpetrators and for the same reasons as in the physical world. In the digital world however the choice of victim may be more random and people can be subject to this type of persistent behaviour from complete strangers.

Awareness of bullying and harassment is probably strongest in terms of its association with young people but anybody can be affected. Social media use is increasing the extent to which teachers and tutors are subject to abuse. Criticism on sites such as [Ratemyprofessors.com](#) and [The Student Room](#) can often overstep the bounds of acceptability. There are a number of celebrity academic cases but this issue is something that many academics on social media may encounter.

Universities have a duty of care so as an institution you need to think very carefully about how best to protect your staff and students from cyber bullying without inadvertently accepting liability for matters beyond your control.

In 2013 UCISA was involved in helping UK universities deal with the appearance of a series of social media sites with names such as Spotted:<institution>. In this case users were asked to post descriptions and/or images of people spotted in institutional libraries causing some students to state that they no longer felt safe in the library. UCISA issued guidance to members about using existing procedures to require hosts to effect a takedown of such pages, focusing particularly on the visibility of university insignia and the lack of subject consent.

Simple steps to help your university discharge its duty of care include:

- Define limits - have a clear policy and guidance on what constitutes acceptable and unacceptable behaviour: this can take the form of a specific social media policy or may be handled by the IT acceptable use policy and other documents such as the student charter and staff conditions of employment.
- Be consistent - have a clear and consistent approach to dealing with inappropriate posts on university official social media channels.
- Offer guidance - support staff and students in the effective use of social media using the suggestions outlined in our Toolkit.
- Help keep your users safe - alert staff and students to the dangers of misuse of social media and point them to sources of advice and help (you can find many sources referenced in our Toolkit).
- Act quickly and only when you need to - be wary of overreacting to ill-considered remarks but be prepared to alert the relevant authorities if an individual appears to be facing real risk.

Our Toolkit offers further guidance on these topics and preventing other forms of cyber crime perpetrated via social media.

5. SUMMARY

A few of the main pointers for corporate users are highlighted here. You will find further information and good practice guidance spread throughout each section of our online Toolkit:

- **Know why you are doing this** - be clear about what benefits you want to achieve.
- **Be consistent** - have an appropriate combination of strategy/policy/guidelines to communicate your approach to all users. This does not need to be complicated – focus on how your use of social media supports your core principles and values rather than on defining a detailed set of rules about what can and cannot be done.
- **Understand your users** - think about using approaches such as [service design](#) to better understand how social media can improve the experience of interacting with your institution. This will help you choose the right tools and design effective processes to support their use.
- **Be visible and accessible** - make sure your users can find you by clearly signposting links to your social media presence on the home page of your website. Make sure the tools you choose are accessible to the widest possible range of users.
- **Create a strong digital identity** - you will have corporate branding and communication guidelines but finding your corporate voice in social media channels can be more of a challenge. Your style should maintain professional standards although it is likely to be less formal than other types of communication. Where you have a group of staff contributing to corporate communications do not be afraid to let them have individual identities.
- **Be current and relevant** - by setting up a social media presence you are committing to keeping it up-to-date and relevant to the target audience. You may want to consider splitting a channel into different identities for different audiences if topics are becoming mixed or, conversely, amalgamating groups that are similar and have limited activity. You also need to ensure that dormant accounts are closed down.
- **Ensure adequate resourcing** - ensure that official channels of communication have an active presence at all reasonable times. What is likely to meet user expectations may vary depending on the purpose for which a particular communication channel is set up. One or two people doing this in their spare time is not likely to generate effective engagement. A certain amount of dedicated resource may be needed in a number of key areas of the institution.
- **Engage your users** - keep your social media channels social and do not use them simply to broadcast information. As part of offering meaningful engagement you will need to decide how best to encourage discussion and the exchange of ideas whilst finding appropriate ways to respond to criticism and views you do not agree with. As an institution you need to find your own voice and create your own image as a place of stimulating and thoughtful debate.
- **Protect your users** - a duty of care to both staff and students demands pro-activity about safety and about sources of advice in cases of cyber bullying or harassment whether or not this takes place through official institutional channels.
- **Protect your institution** - ensure that your institution operates within the law and follow our guidance to mitigate the risk of legal liability or reputational risk should any of your users break the law.
- **Keep an eye on trends** - social media is here to stay but is a fast-moving environment so you need to keep an eye on what your users are doing (and saying) and also look out for new developments that might offer opportunities for you to innovate and differentiate.
- **Measure success** - think about what meaningful success measures look like for your institution and measure the things that matter.

By following our simple, common-sense guidelines you can ensure that your university is free to innovate in this new digital environment and use social tools to deliver benefit in many aspects of activity.

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