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The Use of Social Media Services at Scottish Universities

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ABSTRACT

The opportunities for Scottish universities to engage with their staff, students and the general public using social media services is examined. The presence of public-facing social media links on university homepages was noted to be common to all institutions. Although the specific social media services identified varied considerably, Facebook, Twitter and YouTube were the most prevalent. Using a web-based survey, policies, practices and attitudes towards the use of social media in education by staff and students were explored. The results indicate that while the use of social media by Scottish universities is widespread, there is no consensus on who can use these services or for what purpose these services are encouraged. Neither are there clear official guidelines on the use of social media services for engaging with education and research. All the universities were consistent in their use of third-party social media services rather than using internal, bespoke applications. This paper documents a baseline for the emerging use of social media by universities and notes that the current situation is embryonic, inconsistent, and at times contradictory. A longitudinal study is recommended.

Keywords: Social media, higher education, policies and practices

Introduction

The growth of the use of social media in Higher Education (Rennie, 2014; Conole & Alevizou, 2010) is a noticeable factor in contemporary communications, but as many/most of these services have originally been created for diverse purposes other than specifically for education, there are frequently a number of contested issues with their adoption for formal education (Hemmi, Bayne & Land, 2009). Nevertheless, there have been a number of studies that attempt to assess the level of use and impact of various social media services in higher education, including the use of Facebook (Barden, 2014; Junco, 2012; Roblyer, McDaniel, Webb, Herman, & Witty, 2010), Twitter (Lewis & Rush, 2013; Junco, Heiberger, & Loken, 2011; Dunlap & Lowenthal, 2009), Flickr (Chu & Van Dusen, 2008; Campbell, 2007; Lerman & Jones, 2006) and YouTube (Tan, 2013; Tan & Pearce, 2011; Sharoff, 2011). In summary, the debate has two main strands concerning a) the relative strengths and weakness of each individual form of social media, and consequently which social media service is best for which particular educational task (Rennie & Morrison, 2013) and b) the ethical considerations of using third-party services for confidential work (e.g. tutorials, assessments, archiving) given that service providers frequently reserve the rights to read, copy and even re-use digital materials shared through their sites (Selwyn, 2009). There have also been some well-articulated discussions on the acceptability, validity, even the desirability of academic publishing via social media, in contrast to traditional journals, and how this should influence academic tenure and promotion (Weller, 2011).

Although this is a wide-ranging set of issues which cannot all be resolved here, it is realised that the newness of web 2.0 social media interaction means that there is not even a common understanding of attitudes towards the use of social media at the university level of study. This paper looks at trying to establish a baseline of knowledge about how the nineteen Scottish universities and Higher Educational Institutes deal with the incorporation of social media services into their corporate business of education and research.

Method

The website Homepages for each of the nineteen Scottish universities and Higher Educational Institutes (HEI) were analysed for the presence and nature of social media links. As a follow-up, the pages relating to IT support, Learning and Teaching at the university, the landing pages of senior managers, and the 'contact us' pages were also scrutinised.

A short survey asking for information on the institutional attitudes and policies relating to the use of social media within the institution was then distributed through SurveyMonkey. The survey was sent to representatives of the IT Service, Learning and Teaching (usually the Dean), and the senior administration within each Scottish HEI. A follow-up email was sent as a reminder to complete the survey. The results were compiled and presented below.

The Homepages

All nineteen of Scotland's Higher Educational Institutes (HEI) have an official presence on both Facebook and Twitter for the purposes of promoting the institutional brand, and all of these HEI include direct links to these social media services on the homepage of their institutional website. All HEI also had a presence on YouTube, although in half-a-dozen cases this is a more tenuous link in that there are clips on YouTube which are tagged with the institution name, but which do not have a direct link from university pages, nor are necessarily officially endorsed by the institution. Several other social media services have direct links from the homepages of the universities, including LinkedIn (7 institutions), Flickr (7), Pinterest (5), Google+ (4), Instagram (2), Vimeo (1) and Tumblr (1). Two universities subscribe to a tool that allows links from their homepage to a very large variety of social media services, Abertay University (292 services) and the University of the West of Scotland (339).

Beyond the common inclusion of Facebook and Twitter links, most institutions also link to YouTube, but there is no real consensus on a fourth choice of social media service, indeed, several universities have no links to other social media than these three 'basic' services. The Open University in Scotland contained only a link to Twitter on their homepage, although the Open University (UK) as an institution clearly has made use of several other social media services in other areas of their operation.

Investigation on the internet revealed a number of search-returns for Scottish universities appearing on a wide range of social media sites, mostly having been tagged by individual users. It is clear that some of these individual users do not entirely reflect in the best light the institution mentioned.

University	Facebook	Twitter	YouTube	Other
Aberdeen University	Yes	Yes	Yes	Pinterest
Abertay University	Yes	Yes	-	Pinterest, LinkedIn, Google+, and many others
Dundee University	Yes	Yes	Yes	-
Edinburgh University	Yes	Yes	Yes	LinkedIn
Edinburgh Napier	Yes	Yes	Yes	-
Glasgow University	Yes	Yes	-	Instagram
Glasgow Caledonian University	Yes	Yes	Yes	-
Glasgow School of Art	Yes	Yes	Yes	Vimeo, Flickr
Heriot Watt University	Yes	Yes	Yes	Flickr
University of the Highlands and Islands	Yes	Yes	Yes	LinkedIn, Flickr
Open University Scotland	-	Yes	-	-
Queen Margaret U	Yes	Yes	-	LinkedIn, Flickr
Robert Gordon University	Yes	Yes	Yes	LinkedIn, Flickr, Pinterest, Instagram, Google+
Royal Conservatoire of Scotland	Yes	Yes	Yes	LinkedIn, Flickr, Pinterest, Google+
Scottish Rural University College	Yes	Yes	-	-
St. Andrews University	Yes	Yes	-	-
Stirling University	Yes	Yes	Yes	-

The Use of Social Media Services at Scottish Universities

University	Facebook	Twitter	YouTube	Other
Strathclyde University	Yes	Yes	Yes	Flickr
West of Scotland University	Yes	Yes	-	Tumblr, Pinterest, LinkedIn, Google+ and many others

Table 1: Direct links to social media services on the institutional homepage

The questionnaire

A questionnaire of ten questions was distributed via SurveyMonkey.com to all of the Scottish universities and Scottish HEI via an email to the notified IT Services contact, to the Head/Dean of Learning and Teaching, and to a representative of the Senior Management (usually the office of the University Secretary) of each institution. This in itself proved to be an interesting exercise. Despite participation in the obvious trend towards encouraging more openness and accessibility by using social media links on the homepage, a number of university websites were rather vague and unclear in providing contact details for accessing the relevant key staff and services.

Of the 19 institutions contacted, 10 responded to the survey, completing 15 questionnaires between them. A single response was received from the universities of Edinburgh, Queen Margaret, Robert Gordon, Scottish Rural University College (SRUC), Stirling, Strathclyde and the West of Scotland. Two respondents from Edinburgh Napier completed the questionnaire, and three each from Glasgow Caledonian and the University of the Highlands and Islands (UHI). The staff that completed the questionnaires were fairly evenly divided between IT or technical support services (3), administrative functions staff (4), teaching and learning (4), and 'other staff' (4).

The institutions which responded to the survey are indicated in Table 2. It was notable that those contacts who responded were almost equally divided between the four categories, namely IT/technical services support, Administration, Teaching and Learning, and Other staff functions.

Institution	Number of responses
University of Aberdeen	0
University of Abertay	0
University of Dundee	0
University of Edinburgh	1
Edinburgh Napier University	2
University of Glasgow	0
Glasgow Caledonian University	3
Glasgow School of Art	0
Heriot Watt University	0
University of the Highlands and Islands	3
Open University Scotland	0
Queen Margaret University	1
Robert Gordon University	1
Royal Conservatoire of Scotland	0
Scottish Rural University College	1
University of St. Andrews	0
University of Stirling	1
University of Strathclyde	1
University of West of Scotland	1

Table 2: Institutional responses

The Use of Social Media Services at Scottish Universities

It was indicated by 100% of the 15 respondents that staff at their institution are allowed to engage with social media for the purposes of teaching; 13 respondents indicated that they are also allowed to do so for the purposes of research dissemination; 11 for research supervision; and 14 are allowed use in order to engage in peer-to-peer networking. The results would seem to give a clear indication of the institutional intentions, but in those institutions which provided more than a single respondent, there were some minor differences in the perception of what their institution permitted social media to be used for. These differences were between the 'teaching and learning' staff respondents and the other staff, the former group being more restricted in what they thought is allowed by their university.

Out of 15 respondents, 11 indicated that their institution does have a social media policy, while the other four did not. Again, there were differences in perception between respondents of the same institution, with the Social and Media Engagement Officer stating that their institution does have a social media policy, whereas both the Administration response and the Teaching and Learning staff claim that they are not aware of any such policy. Another respondent (in administration) indicated that while their institution does not have a specific social media policy that "issues associated with use of social media are currently addressed through existing institutional policies, managed by HR (if staff related), academic policy, or IT policy." [REP10]

Interestingly, despite this, all 15 respondents indicated that their staff members were allowed to engage with social media for the purposes of teaching. Progressively fewer respondents acknowledged that staff members are allowed to use social media for peer-to-peer networking (14), for research dissemination (13) and for research supervision (11). Furthermore, only one respondent claimed that staff members at their institution are not encouraged to utilise social media in their work, whether it be for teaching, research dissemination, peer-to-peer networking or the promotion of institutional activities – all the other respondents indicated that staff are encouraged. Attention was drawn to the wide range of possible perceptions of staff "encouragement" to use social media, "from it being actively prohibited (no) through grudging acceptance, to evangelised (a definite yes)." [REP4] It was also noted that while "there is no institutional 'push', however, staff do actively use social media and some have official accounts to engage with students/staff/public." [REP10] Specifically, it was commented by another university that it "runs various types of sessions on the use of social media – from an e-learning researcher's point of view.... [including] promoting research, but in a safe manner." [REP3]

There is a much greater discrepancy, however, when asked whether staff members at each institution are issued with guidelines for the use of social media, with the majority (11) giving a positive reply, and the others (4) indicating that guidelines are currently not issued. Only one respondent commented that the university had "taken advice from the Information Commissioner's Office to ensure [social media] usage complies with the Data Protection Act." [REP12]. Within several institutions there was an apparent contradiction between the perceptions of staff with different functions, perhaps indicating different levels of awareness of the institutional uses of social media by different roles within the university.

The position became less well-defined when considering the question of whether students at each institution are encouraged to use social media in their different areas of academic work. All 15 respondents agreed that students are encouraged to use social media for the promotion of student activities, and most (14) said that social media are encouraged for teaching and learning. A lesser, but still significant, number of respondents claimed that students' use of social media is encouraged for peer-to-peer networking and social support (13) and for research (12). [REP10] indicated that the engagement with students in the use of social media "would be managed and encouraged at a local level, rather than institutional level." Some other uses (3) including student engagement with university services, were also reported as being encouraged.

Significantly, respondents were divided almost equally between those who claim that their institution does issue their students with social media guidelines (8) and those who do not (7). This would seem to be a clear-cut distinction, but in one institution there was a contradiction between one respondent (Administration) who claimed that while their institution does not have a social media policy, they do issue their students with social media guidelines, while another respondent at that institution claimed that the institution does have social media policy and while they "don't issue formal social media guidelines to students, we do offer classes, workshops and a weekly drop-in centre where they can learn more." [REP2]

Opinion is much more diverse on the subject of the system(s) for hosting social media services for learning and teaching, with a small number of respondents (3) indicating that their institution only uses third-party products (e.g. Facebook, Twitter etc.) while a further (4) respondents indicated that their university mainly used third-party products. The majority (8) responded that their institution uses a mixture of internal and externally hosted services. Of greatest interest is that no respondents at all indicated that their institution uses only in-house social media software applications.

Several comments were specifically made by respondents on the changing institutional attitudes towards social media, including "I don't think enough is done to support staff (administration and academic) or students in becoming confident in using these types of tools. I also think that there is some inflexibility in the institution in the range of tools being used." [REP4] Social media was also described as "powerful, often misunderstood and difficult (or impossible) to control." [REP6] In terms of future directions it was noted that "social media will become a large part of our [institutional] Information Services and Technology transformation over the next three years" [REP8]; and also that "the use of HE audiences in advocating an organisation (and ultimately its brand) is only in its infancy – that's the next step." [REP9].

Limitations

The results of this study into the attitudes of Scottish universities towards their use of social media were limited by a number of factors. The total number of Scottish higher education institutes (universities and university-equivalents) is small (19) of which just

The Use of Social Media Services at Scottish Universities

over half (10) responded to this survey. Interestingly, there were better responses from the newer universities, with 3 out of the 4 of the 'ancient universities' not responding at all to this survey request. The growth in popularity of social media applications has led to many hundreds of individual social media services in the public domain, and this study was necessarily confined only to the most popular and prevalent social media applications. Furthermore, no attempt was made to measure or evaluate the volume of use of these social media services by the participating universities; the presence of a link to a particular social media service gives no indication the level of uptake or connectivity of the users with the university, nor of its educational relevance. Lastly, this specific subject area is under-represented in the academic literature, with the vast majority of studies focusing on the use of social media in the classroom, or with geographically distributed students (Tess, 2013), or on staff perceptions (Brown, 2012) and not specifically on the level of adoption and uses of social media services by the universities themselves.

Discussion

Despite these limitations, a number of underlying issues are revealed by this study. Firstly, not surprisingly, there is a high level of awareness of the generic concept of social media services, with every institution advertising their use of at least two, and more commonly three or more, social media services. The study did not seek to identify why the universities decided to use these social media services, nor how active the individual community networks are, but the presumption is that these institutions perceive these services as a medium to encourage greater engagement with students, prospective students, and the public at large. This perception has undoubtedly been encouraged by the results of previous studies which have indicated that up to 94% of their college students were users of Facebook (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007, p. 1153), without even extending to consider the inclusion of any other social media services.

This high level of awareness is also consistent with the study by Moran, Seaman and Tinti-Kane (2011), which surveyed a sample of teaching faculty in US higher education to determine the impact of social media in their personal, professional and instructional capacities. This study found that although "the two most pressing concerns about faculty use of social media are privacy and integrity" that "over 90% of all faculty are using social media in courses they are teaching or for their professional careers outside the classroom" (Moran, Seaman, & Tinti-Kane, p. 3). They note that this is in contrast to only 47% of employees who use social media in the workplace, which would seem to indicate that academics are relatively quicker to adapt to these new technologies than the workforce at large.

In terms of institutional attitudes towards the professional use of social media, there are clearly mixed messages being received through the current survey. Some staff members appear to be under the impression that their university does have an official policy for the use of social media within the institution, while other staff members think not. There is some uncertainty whether staff and students are 'encouraged' to engage with social media through their work, or merely 'allowed' to do so. There would appear to be a suggestion that there are clear patterns of different social media for different purposes and that this is dependent upon whether you speak to academic or administrative staff. Similarly, there is no clear message about whether there are official guidelines for the engagement with social media which are issued to staff and students, with several mentioning that while there are not firm policies, the university provides other forms of direction, through classes, workshops and drop-in centres.

There is a greater level of agreement on the means of deployment of the various social media services, with no university claiming to use entirely in-house software and virtually all respondents indicating that either they only use third-party products (such as Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn etc.). Despite anecdotal concerns about confidentiality, the social media services listed as being used by these Scottish universities are in the main the popular third-party applications that are freely available to the general public for non-educational use.

There appears to be a tacit acceptance by the universities that an association with social media is beneficial (as indicated by the ubiquitous presence on all university homepages), yet the actual engagement with active social media networks by staff and students seems negligible to lukewarm at the institutional level, whatever individual activity is being pursued.

Conclusions

As indicated by more than one respondent, this is a phase of transition and experiment for the use of social media within institutions of higher education. There is undoubtedly a great deal of engagement in the use of these new technologies, by students, staff and the wider public, but at the level of the institution this appears to be neither consistent nor transparent in its application.

It would appear that despite the rhetoric of using Web 2.0 applications to encourage the creation, as well as the consumption of knowledge, most institutions still regard social media services as a way of disseminating their 'message' or their 'brand' to a wider audience rather than as a two-way channel for information exchange or for the engagement with education. Although there are numerous examples of individual lecturers and courses utilising social media in their delivery, the issue of strategic use of social media by the university appears to be in its infancy, to be contradictory to the affordances of the media and to be under-represented in the research literature. Despite the awareness of faculty to the benefits of using social media to add value to learning and teaching engagement, there are very mixed messages and inconsistencies in its implementation. A more thorough study of a wider range of universities would provide an interesting baseline to monitor the use of social media in higher education as the community evolves in response to the changing adoption of social media services by society as a whole.

The Use of Social Media Services at Scottish Universities

Biography

Frank Rennie is Professor of Sustainable Rural Development at the University of the Highlands and Islands and Assistant Principal (Research, Enterprise, and Development) at Lews Castle College UHI. His particular research interest is in online education and the use of ICT for rural areas

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