

Social Media Governance in UK Higher Education Institutions

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Abstract : Whilst the majority of research into social media in education focuses on the applications for teaching and learning environments, this study looks at how such activities can be managed by investigating the current state of social media regulation within UK higher education. Social media has pervaded almost all aspects of higher education; from marketing, recruitment and alumni relations to both distance and classroom-based learning and teaching activities. In terms of who uses it and how it is used, social media is growing at an unprecedented rate, particularly amongst the target market for higher education. Whilst the platform presents opportunities not found in more traditional methods of communication and interaction, such as speed and reach, it also carries substantial risks that come with inappropriate use, lack of control and issues of privacy. Typically, organisations rely on the concept of a social contract to guide employee behaviour to conform to the expectations of that organisation. Yet, where academia and social media intersect applying the notion of a social contract to enforce governance may be problematic; firstly considering the emphasis on treating students as customers with a growing focus on the use and collection of satisfaction metrics; and secondly regarding the notion of academic's freedom of speech, opinion and discussion, which is a long-held tradition of learning instruction. Therefore the need for sound governance procedures to support expectations over online behaviour is vital, especially when the speed and breadth of adoption of social media activities has in the past outrun organisations' abilities to manage it. An analysis of the current level of governance was conducted by gathering relevant policies, guidelines and best practice documentation available online via internet search and institutional requests. The documents were then subjected to a content analysis in the second phase of this study to determine the approach taken by institutions to apply such governance. Documentation was separated according to audience, i.e.: applicable to staff, students or all users. Given many of these included guests and visitors to the institution within their scope being easily accessible was considered important. Yet, within the UK only about half of all education institutions had explicit social media governance documentation available online without requiring member access or considerable searching. Where they existed, the majority focused solely on employee activities and tended to be policy based rather than rooted in guidelines or best practices, or held a fallback position of governing online behaviour via implicit instructions within IT and computer regulations. Explicit instructions over expected online behaviours is therefore lacking within UK HE. Given the number of educational practices that now include significant online components, it is imperative that education organisations keep up to date with the progress of social media use. Initial results from the second phase of this study which analyses the content of the governance documentation suggests they require reading levels at or above the target audience, with some considerable variability in length and layout. Further analysis will add to this growing field of investigating social media governance within higher education.

Keywords : governance, higher education, policy, social media

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