



Social media for student engagement: 20 good practice suggestions for higher education in Wales

Purpose of this guide

This guide is aimed at those with responsibility for, or interest in, social media and student engagement in Welsh higher education. It takes as its starting point the philosophy of WISE (Wales Initiative for Student Engagement) which states:

“Students in Wales sit at the centre of their educational experience:

- They are partners
- Their feedback is valued
- They are considered experts in the learning process.”¹

It is recognised that universities and colleges in Wales already make use of social media to support a variety of functions including marketing and recruitment, external communications, learning, teaching and research. This guide aims to build on existing good practice. It offers a range of suggestions which institutions may find useful when reviewing their processes in order to create greater opportunities for student engagement. Links to further resources are provided.

How is social media changing student engagement?

According to a survey in 2012,² Facebook, Twitter and YouTube were the main social media channels adopted by UK universities, with many others used on a lesser scale such as LinkedIn, iTunes U, Google+, Vimeo and Flickr. In addition, institutional learning and teaching systems, such as e-portfolios and virtual learning environments, may offer their own social networking features. The rise in use of social networks has been accompanied by a rapid growth in the use of mobile devices by the student population.

¹ <http://www.nus.org.uk/wise>

² <http://ukwebfocus.wordpress.com/2012/06/06/guest-post-further-evidence-of-use-of-social-networks-in-the-uk-higher-education-sector/>

Social media provides institutions with new ways to tune into, capture and respond to the student voice, complementing more traditional methods such as surveys and staff-student meetings. Unlike more traditional methods, social media offers students greater opportunities to initiate and lead the conversation.

Initially HE institutions used social media channels primarily as a broadcast medium. However, there are signs that this approach is changing. Social media is designed to enable sharing of user-generated content and facilitate connections between people; as such it can fit well with a culture which seeks to engage students as partners in shaping their higher education experience. When deployed alongside other forms of communication, social media may help to nurture the sense of “belonging” to an academic community which, according to the report *Building student engagement and belonging in Higher Education at a time of change* is “critical to student retention and success”³.

How can social media help student engagement?

- social media can reach students where they are: on social networks, on mobile devices, at a time and place convenient to them;
- you can listen to what your students are saying and identify advocates;
- social media can help to manage expectations at different stages of the student lifecycle;
- feedback may be responded to very quickly. Negative comments or complaints can be “nipped in the bud”, the response can be used to provide helpful information and it can demonstrate how an issue is being addressed;
- data on social media activity can be analysed to inform strategic decision-making, alongside other sources of intelligence;
- social media can help to increase awareness of the less visible aspects of the organisation, allowing a view “behind the scenes”;
- social media provides a valuable connection with services such as student support, library and IT services;

³ http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/documents/retention/What_works_final_report.pdf

- social networks extend beyond campus, providing a way for students to contact each other as well as potential applicants, alumni and the wider community. They also enable students to engage with the wider academic community within and beyond their institution, to help inform their learning and research;
- social media can amplify and reinforce your wider student engagement activity.

20 suggestions to enhance your student engagement with social media

1. Take a strategic approach and decide what you want to achieve with social media. This does not necessarily require you to have a separate social media strategy document, but you do need to ensure that social media considerations are aligned with existing strategies. Be prepared to review your strategy regularly and ensure it is clearly communicated.
2. Ensure your social media group or team involves all stakeholders including students.
3. Consider how you will enable students to participate in the management of your social media spaces.
4. Policies or guidelines need to address e-safety, e-responsibility and digital professionalism appropriately, with special consideration for under-18s and vulnerable adults. While it is important to acknowledge and manage the risks associated with social media, guidelines can also be enabling, helping staff and students to be more effective in their use of social media.
5. Select your social media channels according to the groups you want to engage and the kind of content you want to share. Find out what your students are using, on what devices, and how they prefer to communicate with you.
6. Allow departments and services sufficient flexibility to engage with social media directly: their staff may be best placed to respond most promptly to queries or complaints.
7. Effective engagement through social media is closely bound up with trust, authenticity and 'word of mouth' communication. Involving students in developing your social media channels may help in finding an authentic voice.

8. Social media engagement is about more than simply pushing out information and creating a marketing buzz. Let your students do the talking and focus on listening.
9. It is not enough to set up a social media account. Make sure you keep it current and lively. If it is not productive or you are unable to maintain it, close it down.
10. It's not all about 'likes' or numbers of followers. Increasingly, the focus of social engagement is on building relationships and advocacy.
11. It is important to offer more than basic text posts. Include links to useful content such as student blogs, images, video or open educational resources.
12. Be responsive to queries, suggestions and complaints received via social media. Ensure good communication between departments so that if, for example, a query comes in via marketing but relates to a student service or department, the most appropriate person can provide a rapid and effective response (this may mean making provision for cover outside office hours).
13. Make it easy for students (and others) to discover your social media channels and what they are used for.
14. Help your followers share your content with their networks including those social media channels where you do not maintain an account.
15. Consider how you are going to ensure that staff and students have the digital literacy skills to interact confidently and safely with social media. Digital habits and skills are not always readily transferred into academic or professional life.
16. Not all students may choose to engage through social media, and social media channels may not be equally available to all. Consider accessibility and offer a choice of communication channels to suit your students.
17. Be prepared to listen to what students are saying about you, not only on those channels where you have a presence but on others too. Be prepared to respond promptly and positively.
18. Use data from social media to inform your decision making. Analytics are starting to provide new ways of understanding students' online activities, for example visualisations.

19. Whilst this guide is focussed on student engagement, it is worth noting that social media engagement can extend beyond enrolled students to include potential applicants and their families, pre-entry students, alumni, employers and the wider community.
20. Encourage staff and students to share their own expertise on the effective use of social media tools and their use in learning, teaching and research. Your e-learning team, learning and teaching support unit or library are likely to be good sources of knowledge, whilst in several UK institutions students are being engaged as digital pioneers and change agents.

Further information

Key Jisc resources

<http://bit.ly/socialmediaJisc>

Case studies and examples

<http://bit.ly/socialmediaexamples>

Comment

<http://bit.ly/socialmediacomment>

General guidance and policies

<http://bit.ly/socialmediageneral>

Social media for student engagement

<http://bit.ly/socialmediaengage>

This list comprises all links from the above lists plus some additional sites.

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