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Evaluating student expectations: social networks in career development

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Evaluating Student Expectations: Social Networks in Career Development (0188)

Programme number: D11

Research Domain: Student Experiences

Online social networks have become increasingly popular among Higher Education (HE) students. This brings new challenges to the way universities adapt social networks to meet student expectations and how they enhance career development and relationships with employers. This study reports the findings of a survey of 272 UK and international business school students on career development and entrepreneurship as a part of a wider study of online social networking in HE. The results of the study reveal key differences between undergraduate, postgraduate and international student population. The paper argues for a pressing need to raise the awareness of British undergraduate students on the enhancement of their career prospects through best practice in building and exploiting social capital on online social networks. The conclusions of the study help better understand motivations and barriers to an effective application of social networks in Higher Education.

Research Domain: Student Experience

Evaluating Student Expectations: Social Networks in Career Development Outline

Online social networking services provide a potentially convenient platform for students to connect during their studies at university and enhance their career development. It is crucial to understand the motivations and any barriers to an effective application of social networks in Higher Education. Social networks have been important in building social capital (Ellison et al., 2007), i.e. resources accumulated through relationships (Lin 2001). Social capital has been linked to a range of positive social outcomes including broadening employment and business opportunities (Helliwell and Putnam, 2004). However, very little research attention has been paid to assessing the ways in which social networks can influence student employability. Possibly the most popular online social network service, Facebook, as been originally started by Harvard students and is generally regarded as a means for informal communications between people. On the other hand LinkedIn has been specifically designated for finding and maintaining business connections. This type of social networks much more aimed at developing business links, finding employment and consultancy opportunities. Recently, Facebook has seen an increase in the registrations of people in their mid careers. It has been suggested (McKensey 2008) that with the downturn in the global economy, people turn to Facebook in search of business contacts and safer employment prospects. Employability enhancement and career management among a diverse range of core university processes can be facilitated through application of social networks (Berg et al., 2007). This study evaluated the use of social networks among students, focussing on their reasons to join, expectations from, and actual use of social networking for career development in a HE setting. With 98% of current UK students already members of Facebook (Dulton et al., 2009) social networks have the potential to serve as an established platform to connect and provide support to students.

Methodology

As a part of a wider study of online social networking in HE, a two phase approach to data collection was adopted, with two focus groups informing the development of a survey. The questionnaire in paper format was distributed to a random sample of undergraduate and postgraduate students including UK and European universities. The sample was drawn entirely from students studying on business courses. The total number of respondents comprised of 272 individuals, which gives a representative sample. The demographic data collected included information on age, nationality, number of years of work experience, first language, year and type of degree. Further questions covered a range of expectations and motivation for persistent use of various networks. The questions worded ('Why did you join this social network ' with answer options including ' Find a job', 'Make business contacts' as well as 'To find contacts at the University' and 'To be generally sociable', etc.) were provided for each network type. A Likert scale was used (1- Strongly Agree to 5- Strongly disagree).

Findings

Out of the 272 respondents the vast majority indicated Facebook as their primary social network with 214 registrations, followed by MySpace with 42 and LinkedIn with 27. The average number of registrations per individual was on 1.4 social networks.

The main emphasis of the survey was to uncover business prospects and career opportunities opening through participation in social networks. Interestingly, Facebook for the British students is not seen as providing opportunities to make business connections (4.43 out of a maximum of 5, higher score being strongly disagree) and even less so for MySpace at (5). This group also does not place expectations on finding a job at LinkedIn (4). A different trend emerges from non-British respondents who see LinkedIn as an opportunity to find a job at (2.5). If we explore the dimension of level of studies, however, a slightly different picture emerges on the employability expectations. LinkedIn is seen by postgraduate students as an avenue for finding a job or a new business connection at (3). Undergraduate students indicated no registration for LinkedIn altogether. An opposite trend for postgraduate students revealed no registrations on MySpace which could explain the orientation towards networks that provide career opportunities as compared to leisure.

Making contact with people from the University is an important factor for both undergraduate and postgraduate students with Facebook scoring (2.46) and (2.39) respectively. LinkedIn's importance for making contact at the University (2.5) is higher than finding a job (3) for postgraduate students.

Discussion

The growing popularity of online social networking is altering the nature of business networking with significant consequences for career management. It is interesting to note that many people maintain a presence on both Facebook and LinkedIn, keeping their private informal profile on the former and maintaining a public, business profile on the latter. This paper discusses the implications of the shift in the way universities support students in their career development and helps to enhance their

employability. This study revealed different expectations between undergraduate and postgraduate students from social networks. While postgraduate students well understood the significance of business networking and increasing their social capital by means of social networks, undergraduates are far from realising the career benefits and business prospects enabled through networking with current students, alumni and employers. Also, international students across all levels have realised and are taking advantage of social connections closely relating them to career development. Universities may wish to take a more active role in developing British undergraduate students' abilities to use social networks for career progression.

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