

Article

Social networking and international student integration at University

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ABSTRACT

This paper will describe a project designed to investigate the transition of international students into the University of Reading, focusing on interpersonal dynamics as evidenced in social networking and group work. The project was undertaken as part of the Undergraduate Research Opportunities Programme (UROP), a scheme to give Part 2 students hands-on research experience, and had two aims. One was to provide an environment where the student investigators could learn and develop research skills through experience; the other was to gather data from current students to learn more about how they use social media and social networking and how this impacts on their sense of integration into the University community. This paper is a reflective account explaining the process, drawing on the UROP students' perspectives and presenting some of the findings. The surveys carried out by the student researchers indicated a preference for Wechat over Facebook and Instagram, reflecting the high proportion of Chinese among the international student population, but there was a strong sense generally that social media networks could and should be used more by the University to build multicultural interaction. The process of developing the research and writing up the findings gave the student researchers more confidence in their developing research skills, but increased their awareness of the challenges of undertaking research.

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Background

One of the key strategic teaching and learning priorities at the University of Reading is to engage students in active research. To this end, since 2006 it has run the Undergraduate

Research Opportunities Programme (UROP), offering undergraduate students a funded opportunity to work on small-scale research projects with academic staff for six weeks during the summer vacation period. This is a competitive scheme with funding being offered to a selection of projects that are then advertised to Part 2 students who apply to work on them. Sarah Brewer and Liz Wilding, English for Academic Purposes specialists, proposed this particular project, building on ongoing research into the experience of international students moving from the Pre-sessional Programme to subject departments. A significant feature of student life in the current climate of UK Higher Education is the prominence of group communication. This operates on several different levels: socially through social media; academically as students engage in group projects; and as a mix of the two as students interact through social media negotiating their way through demanding academic courses. Some research has been carried out into group work and how international and home students cope with the demands of managing a task in a multicultural group, (Popov, Brinkman, Biemans, Mulder, Kuznetsov, Noroozi, 2012; Moore and Hampton, 2015; Sedghi and Rushworth, 2017; Spencer-Oatey and Dauber, 2017). There has also been some research into how international students use social media (Margaryan, Littlejohn and Vojt, 2010; Paul, Baker, and Cochran, 2012; Tess, 2013; Carey, 2017). However, little is known of the experience of international students in the University of Reading and how they are interconnecting (virtually and face-to-face) once on their courses and the impact this may have on their studies. A key goal of the project, therefore was begin to gather evidence of the ways in which students were interacting and use analysis of this to inform course design at ISLI.

In spring 2017, two second-year UG student-researchers were recruited through the UROP: Jingshu (Ivy) Huang, an Accounting and Finance student from China, and Emma Copping, an English Literature student from the UK. Due to time constraints, it was agreed that although Ivy and Emma would co-ordinate their work, they would conduct their research independently.

”Interaction, communication, participation are approaches for international students to adapt to a new culture.” (Ivy)

The project: student training in methodology

The UROP scheme is intended to provide a structured learning opportunity; the student researchers were given on-going support through the research process and were encouraged to explore and develop relevant research methods and tools. The first step was to undertake a literature review and to produce an annotated bibliography. The researchers' interests focused on slightly different areas and student populations; Emma focused on home and international students' use of social media platforms and the impact this has on their university experience, while Ivy looked at how international students build their social networks and the impact social media may have on this network building. They each constructed questionnaires, selected appropriate online survey tools (EasyQuest and Qualtrics), and sent them to different groups. Together, they received a total of 112 responses, after which Ivy conducted two student interviews to supplement her survey data. Finally, they collated and analysed their data to produce final reports and posters to present at University level.

Findings

Several points emerged from the literature review. In terms of face to face social networks, some findings have identified a tendency for international students to form co-national friendship groups first, then make connections with home students and finally to develop relationships with international students of other nationalities (Taha & Cox, 2014; Schartner, 2015). The building of networks can be affected negatively by stereotyping (Harrison, 2010; Montgomery, 2010) and different expectations of the study experience. In terms of online networks, this is an area that has become increasingly the focus of attention, although until recently empirical evidence has been limited (Tess, 2013). Some findings suggest that online social networks can enhance students' academic interaction (Hamid et al, 2015); while other evidence indicates a negative correlation between time students spend on online social networks (OSNs) and attention span and academic performance (Paul et al, 2012).

The two UROP questionnaires collected data on student networking, as well as on their usage of and views of social media usage. There were 37 respondents to Emma's questionnaire, eight of whom were home students. The most popular platforms were WeChat (25 users); Facebook and Instagram (both 21 users); and Whatsapp (15 users). Students were somewhat more likely to use their choice of social media to maintain relationships (92%), for social events (70%) and for academic purposes (63%), as opposed to establishing new contacts (57%). Only 24% responded that they did not rely on social media for social interactions and

there appeared to be strong support for developing social media networks within the University to build multicultural interaction.

Of the 75 respondents to Ivy's questionnaire, the majority were Chinese (82%) and were studying at Master's level (60%). The findings indicated that they felt their social relationships at university were based largely around class work and friendship rather than on pre-existing advice and support networks. The length of time international students had been in the UK had an effect on the relative importance of motivational factors involved in making friends. Learning English and learning about local culture were more important early on, but decreased in relative importance compared to factors such as shared study interests over time. The data on social media use showed a preference for WeChat (33%) over other tools such as Facebook (19%) and Instagram (17%) for general use. However, while only 13% used Facebook for academic purposes, 35% used it to make new friends. Overall, 85% of the students agreed that using social media such as Facebook/Whatsapp is helpful in making friends.

Ivy also conducted semi-structured interviews with two students. They both expressed some dissatisfaction with the extent to which they had been able to integrate with local students, though were hopeful that there would be more opportunities in the coming academic year. They reiterated the view that more could be done by the University to support students integrating and provide networking opportunities for international students.

Discussion

The findings from the two surveys revealed similarities and differences. They both noted the importance of WeChat, a highly popular Chinese multi-function social media mobile app, to many of our students. It is perhaps no coincidence that Ivy, who distributed her questionnaire via WeChat as well as email, received a higher response rate than Emma, who used Facebook as her secondary distribution method. They also showed, unsurprisingly, that students make use of different media for different purposes. The picture of networking that emerged was of a dynamic process, changing according to the people, situation, or task-type involved, and also changing over time. However, as the research progressed, "the complexities of the factors impacting the interactions became apparent" and Emma saw a clear need for further research beyond the limited six-week period of the project.

“Social media have played a key role in helping me integrate into Danish Higher Education.” (Emma)

Reflections

We asked Emma and Ivy to reflect on their experience of carrying out the research, thinking about its impact on themselves as students; the challenges; and what, with hindsight, they might change in their approach to the project. Both commented that being involved in the work had developed their understanding of the processes of research, but also that it had impacted on their actual practice in various ways. Emma had previously used social media largely to maintain existing relationships, but as an Erasmus student then studying at a university in Denmark, she felt that the knowledge gained had “given me a new outlook on how to actively immerse myself in another culture” and that she was actually using social media to her “social and academic advantage”. In fact, she concluded, social media have been a gateway to much interaction with other international students and have played “a key role in helping me integrate into Danish Higher Education”. Ivy, as an international student with three years in UK HE (Foundation, and two years of undergraduate study) felt that her research indicated that group work was “the most effective and realistic approach” to getting to know students from other countries. She reflected that, in future, she would “try to have further relationship that goes beyond pure academic cooperation”. This realisation may have been influenced by the opportunity to work closely with Emma, as a home student, in the few weeks where they were both researching the project. She had also become aware of a wider use of Facebook than she had expected and that “in order to get involved with peers and other local people, I may need to use Facebook more regularly than before”.

Both Ivy and Emma felt a great deal more confident in their ability to carry out academic research, but had found that the demands of undertaking research were quite challenging, particularly in researching the literature. Ivy felt better informed about “social relationships and social media” after some guided reading of articles to form the basis of a literature review, but could not, initially, identify any “link or logic between them”. For her, “working out the implied connection between articles and focusing on a narrowed area” was what she struggled with the most. It was important to reduce the possible areas of focus, but very difficult to “find an entry point in order to design and think” about a specific point. Emma

also found the literature review a challenge, with a similar struggle to pinpoint” a specific issue” when she wanted to “explore many issues”. It was hard to move away from the literature onto the “more practical elements of the research project” and she wished that she had focused more narrowly which might have yielded “more fruitful and insightful results”. Emma also recognised the challenges of time management in working independently on a project and would have reduced the time she spent exploring the literature. Ivy’s reflection focused more on methodology. She had found time to carry out two interviews, but felt that these produced limited data and that the interviewees were constrained by being interviewed individually and did not “think associatively” and did not expand on their answers. Retrospectively, she wished that she had used focus groups as well, in the expectation that this might have generated more discussion and the opportunity for more “thinking”. A significant outcome of the research for both Ivy and Emma was the realisation of the difficulties that international students face in building networks beyond those already established with friends and contacts within their own communities. Ivy saw the fairly strong response from her questionnaire as an indication of “strong motivation” among international students to “get involved in university activities”, but recommended that universities should engage more with the WeChat platform to reach Chinese students. Emma’s insights into the use of social media drawn from her research have enabled her to integrate successfully as she became an international student herself.

Conclusion

The original motivation to undertake the research was to develop a deeper understanding of student networking and social media especially in relation to academic group work. During the course of the project, the focus shifted more to the role of networking in the transition process of international and home students, to reflect the interests of the student-researchers in the team. It also became clear that although many students use some form of social media, they had not generally reflected on the possibility of how it could enhance their experience, social and academic, at University. Many would welcome more engagement with the institution through social media that they are already familiar with, rather than adjusting to new social networking tools. Even if the more familiar social media are not used, the greater awareness may be effective in enhancing engagement, as evidenced through Emma’s own experience in Denmark. Finally, a real highlight of the project was the fact that it was a collaborative effort, in which we could share different views and perspectives on a topic of academic and personal interest to all of us. Our findings corroborated previous research

demonstrating the diverse ways in which students use social media for networking, and also reinforced the value of understanding the needs and interests of different student groups in more detail, rather than as one large cohort. The limited time scale constrained what we could do, but indicated a fruitful direction for continued research in the same area; a follow-up student research project will take place in summer 2018.

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