

# THETA

The Higher Education Technology Agenda

## Social Media in Higher Education: Strategy and Support for Staff and Students

In 2013, social networking was the second most popular online activity after internet banking for Australians (ABS, 2014). The popularity and apparent ubiquity of social media is one of the most obvious and compelling arguments for integrating such technologies into higher education. Already, social media impacts a wide range of activities ranging in scope from marketing and communication to teaching and learning in higher education (Hrastinski & Dennen, 2012). Social media presents many exciting possibilities and opportunities for higher education. This session will focus on one staff focussed and one student focussed social media innovation currently underway at QUT. First, it will focus on the actions of QUT's social media working group. The working group's aim is to ensure an overarching social media policy for the university is developed and implemented that supports staff in the use of social media across a range of activities. Second, it will discuss the eResponsible and eProfessional Online resources for students project. The focus of this project is to develop a suite of online resources targeted at the development of social media skills for undergraduate students at QUT. These initiatives are complementary and both aim to minimise risk while maximising opportunities for the university.

Research on social media's impact on governance processes in higher education is limited (Joosten, Pasquini & Harness, 2013). This lack of research may be due to the lack of documented social media policies and guidelines in higher education (Johnston, 2014; Joosten, Pasquini & Harness, 2013). While QUT prides itself on being a future focussed, innovative, 'university for the real world' (Queensland University of Technology, 2014), no university wide social media framework currently exists. Consequently, the adoption of social media has been strong in some faculties and divisions and weaker in others. There are several risks associated with not having a holistic social media framework (Patel, 2014). First, faculties and divisions within QUT have been using SNS without any organising principles whilst others have been developing a variety of internal guidelines. Second, due to the large number of unmonitored accounts, QUT runs the risk of reputational harm. Finally,

the absence of a holistic social media framework means that SNS are not being exploited to their full potential. The purpose of creating a university wide social media framework is not to 'clamp down' or restrict the use of social media amongst staff at QUT (McNamara, 2011). Rather, the purpose to create clear policy and guidelines to enable staff to use social media in a supportive environment that maintains balance between freedom and responsibility (Bordeaux, 2011).

The QUT Social Media Working Group was formed in August 2014 to address the recommendations provided in a recent review of social media risks and opportunities for the university. Tasks are focussed on ensuring an overarching social media policy for the university is developed and implemented that supports staff in the use of social media for QUT business, minimises risk and presents opportunities for the university. The working group consists of representatives from all university sections and faculties. The tasks include identifying the risks and opportunities across information technology, research, teaching, and university business issues, social media research workshops to share and identify opportunities for improved exposure, exploring and assessing social media management tools, collecting social media practices from across all sections to identify commonalities and specialisations, and reviewing human resource and marketing and communications policies as they relate to staff. Policy and training is expected to be fully implemented by March 2015.

Running in tandem with the staff focused Social Media Working Group is the student focussed eResponsible and eProfessional project focussed on social media issues affecting undergraduate students. Social networking is extremely popular amongst young people. A survey by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS, 2014) found that 92% of online 18-24 year olds preferred social networking over other online activities. Given the apparent saturation and proliferation of social networking sites amongst this age group, the lack of resources targeting the social media skills of 18-25 year olds is unsurprising and appears to be underpinned by the assumption that this demographic already has the skills required to be technologically and socially proficient online.

It is easy to over generalise the needs of 18-25 year olds based on the research available. These generalisations fail to take into account that the majority of this research has been conducted in the USA (Bolton et al., 2013) as well as the fact that research distinctions are commonly made between generations rather than within generations (Lichy, 2012). Often, the only prerequisite for being deemed as competent online, is access to the internet (Smith, Skrbis, & Western, 2013). Given that technology is changing at a rapid rate, the basic skills required to understand ICTs should be seen as progressive and in flux and therefore the assumption cannot be made that access to the internet equips users with the necessary skills to function even at the most basic levels online (Hsieh, 2012). Furthermore, simplifying 18-25 year olds into a homogenous group whose only characteristic is the ready access to technology and the internet neglects the wide range of social, cultural, economic, political and historical contexts that impact upon the individual.

With this in mind, QUT Library has taken charge of creating a suite of online learning resources to target the social media skills of its undergraduates. These resources focus on developing students' knowledge and understanding of social media as it pertains to their rights and responsibilities, mental health and employment. This has been an exceptionally



challenging task. Student focus groups conducted with undergraduate students revealed a variety of complex needs and challenges. On the one hand, students disclosed many gaps in their knowledge and understanding about social media. They reported cyberbullying, lack of knowledge about privacy and security settings, as well as limited awareness of how to strategically manage their online reputations. On the other hand, they felt that they already knew everything there was to know about social media and did not see the need for learning further skills.

This session will discuss the tasks of both the staff focussed social media working group and the student focussed eResponsible and eProfessional project. It will focus on the planning and development of both innovations and the key challenges associated with the implementation of each. Finally, each project's relevance to higher education will be discussed.

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