

Digital Media to 'Engage the Disengaged': Reaching out to Humanities Students at the University of Southampton

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Introduction

This paper presents the case study of how digital media was implemented to reach undergraduate students within a project (July 2014 to June 2017). The project, 'Mission Employable', seeks to encourage student-staff partnership working to create employability activity, using the tagline 'knowing, growing and showing the skills for career success'. Mission Employable is based at the University of Southampton in the Faculty of Humanities. The Faculty hosts over 3,000 students studying single or combined degrees across seven disciplines: Archaeology, English, Film, History, Modern Languages, Music and Philosophy.

While the classification 'hard to reach' traditionally focuses on cohorts of students whose perceived difference marks them out as potentially less engaged, for example mature students, distance learners, international students, black and minority ethnic (BME) students, those living in the family home or those caring for others, a common marker is a lack of time spent on campus (McVitty, 2015). These students are both conceptually 'hard to reach', because their difference sets them apart, and practically 'hard to reach' because their difference either causes them to stay away from campus and not join in, or, in the case of mature students and carers, actively prevents them from attending.

Whilst we cannot badge every University of Southampton Humanities student as conceptually 'hard to reach', in practice the majority are difficult to engage. Students studying Humanities subjects have comparatively low contact hours and this, combined with the requirement for a significant amount of independent study, results in cohorts who are often away from campus. Such students often feel disengaged from the university experience and unwilling to participate. Communicating effectively with such cohorts can be challenging; actively engaging them in co- or extra-curricular activity is even harder. For Humanities students at a STEM-led institution (Southampton is 65% STEM), there is a double barrier: the added belief that the support on offer is not for them, but for science students (Medland *et al*, 2015). The preliminary work to decide on a new employability strategy for Humanities at Southampton, which led to the launch of Mission Employable, used data collected at events to show that just eighty-seven students from the Faculty had engaged in careers-related activity across the academic year 2012/13. Two years into the project, in 2015/16, 1,588 students were now engaged.

Mission Employable and social media

The core Mission Employable team comprises two staff members and five student partners, each with a focused remit of development activity. The core team is supported by a twenty-strong Student Working Group, representing each of our seven disciplines. The project incorporates the knowledge and ideas of both students and staff and we work in partnership to deliver activity. As a staff-student partnership project with a Faculty-wide remit, Mission Employable has been ideally placed to seek alternative methods of reaching out to and engaging the student body. Our activity has required extensive student participation and leadership, and partnership working quickly led to the realisation that social media was an under-utilised but effective communication channel between the Faculty and its students. Student-staff collaboration in summer 2014 successfully established a strong social media presence, using Facebook, Twitter and (more recently) Instagram (Medland *et al*, 2015). This collaboration, in its third year and now well-established, has enabled us to enter into

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frank dialogue regarding what will and will not engage the student body. Social media has since formed the foundation for much of our activity, providing the means to reach out to our students when they are off-campus.

Using Facebook

It is estimated that 99% of 16-24 year olds use social media at least once a week (*Business Insider*, 2017), and confirmation of this came from Southampton's Humanities students, who regularly form their own Facebook Groups for modules to keep in touch outside class, share ideas and ask questions. Facebook was therefore the first social media account that Mission Employable created. The Facebook Page provides a means for our content to be published directly to students' Facebook newsfeeds, so that information published by Mission Employable appears alongside other news, celebrity gossip and friend posts. Facebook, as a recognised, intuitive and accessible medium, has put a friendly face to the Mission Employable brand. We have created a dedicated account, named 'Charlotte' (after our employability coordinator), which can be contacted directly with any queries or information shares. Whilst email is central to many contemporary businesses and, indeed, the main means of staff-to-student communication within the institution, we have found that students are far more likely to send us an instant message online than to dispatch a formal email. Facebook provides the means for a more relaxed and personal approach to communication, providing a safe space to ask questions and fostering collaborative working.

Sharing on Twitter

In addition to Facebook, Mission Employable has a Twitter account. Although tweets are limited to 140 characters, the platform provides a regular means of interaction with our students. The fast-paced nature of Twitter enables us to distribute a wide range of information rapidly. Using Twitter, we can retweet information from the University's central Careers and Employability Service, as well as Faculty updates, articles and links to opportunities which students may find helpful. The use of targeted hashtags and Twitter account tagging enables us to channel relevant information to different disciplines, maximising interest.

Adding Instagram

During summer 2016, we added a Mission Employable Instagram account. The decision to make use of this platform was driven by student response to surveys undertaken at the end of 2015/16, which suggested that visual material was becoming an increasingly popular access-route for our students. Instagram has enabled us to follow many of the Humanities-based student societies, which now follow us back. As visible Instagram content is based not only on who you follow, but also the content the people you follow choose to 'like', it is a fast way to get messages across and grow engagement. In recent months, as more students opted to 'like' our content, our posts appeared more often on the 'Images You Might Like' section of the application, resulting in a rapid increase in followers. Instagram engages students who may not be immediately interested in the employability information posted on Twitter and Facebook, but whose attention can be grabbed by visual images and by what their friends like and follow. We have found that Instagram Follows have grown more quickly than Twitter (0 to 115 in four months) and that the majority (76%) of our followers are female. Whilst our Twitter and Facebook bases are bigger (with 581 followers and 414 'likes' respectively), Instagram routinely provides more click-throughs to events and activities.

Engaging the disengaged

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The goal has been to engage as many students in the Faculty as possible, increasing participation in on-site, careers-related events and with initiatives such as our Peer Mentoring Scheme through the consistent use of digital media to increase student engagement. The various meanings of 'student engagement' - a nebulous term with cognitive, emotional and behavioural dimensions (Trowler, 2010), - the pedagogic strategies developed to increase it, and how effective it is in producing learning gain, have recently come under scrutiny (Macfarlane and Tomlinson, 2017). For the purpose of this case study, student engagement is understood as being:

“based mainly on behavioural expectations that relate to students adopting a positive attitude towards learning actively and more broadly contributing to the life of the institution” (Macfarlane and Tomlinson, 2017:9)

Mission Employable has aimed to encourage this positive attitude by fostering a sense of ownership and, in partnering on delivery with our students, engendered active participation in co- and extra-curricular activity. Having successfully engaged half the Humanities student population, we turned our attention to the remaining 50%. Through focus groups and Facebook-based polling across the student body, we identified three 'hard to reach' groups: First, pre-arrival students, a group recognised as crucial to successful engagement with new starters; since students in Induction week are overwhelmed with potential activity and contact, contacting them before they begin is a more effective way of getting them to engage with the project.

Second, students on a Residency Abroad (RA). Each year, approximately 10% of our cohort go away to study or work. Mission Employable loses contact with these students and finds it hard to reconnect with them once they return.

Third, highly-capable, self-sufficient students. This group was identified as being disengaged because they don't believe that they need support, but are often the 'final panic' students who, following the submission of their dissertations, may realise that they do not know what to do next. Through an exploration of how Mission Employable has sought to engage these 'hard to reach' Humanities students with its activities, this case study will consider the use of digital media to engage the disengaged.

New Starters: pre-engagement with peers

The Humanities Peer Mentoring Scheme was established at the start of Mission Employable and is entirely student-led. Students take on leadership roles as Faculty- and subject-level coordinators, and there is a requirement for c. 180 student mentors from years two and three, working in pairs, to mentor groups of ten first-year mentees (Quince and Medland, 2016). Since its establishment, the scheme has made use of social media to engage both current and incoming Humanities students. The student Faculty Coordinator employed Facebook and Twitter in pre-arrivals communications to engage new students, and then throughout the scheme to maintain the engagement levels of both mentees and mentors.

Digital media was used to recruit current students to the Peer Mentoring Scheme and to raise awareness amongst new starters. The Coordinator advertised the scheme on Facebook, pushing it out through existing University of Southampton subject society groups, in order to recruit from all seven Humanities disciplines. Incoming students were engaged through Twitter. In September 2016, the Coordinator created and managed a social media event called 'Hums Top Tips' which encouraged pre-arrival peer-to-peer support by asking current students to tweet 'the things I wish had I known before I began University' for the incoming Humanities cohort, using the hashtag: #HumsTopTips16. We had a 'reach' (number of Twitter accounts who engaged at some point with our campaign) of just under 55,000, with over 200 original tweets containing a wide-range of advice tweeted by students, staff and recent alumni. During the #HumsTopTips16 highpoint (September 16th) we were trending in SOUTHAMPTON thanks to the involvement of local businesses, the University

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Library Service, the Students' Union and the University's Vice-President for Education. Tweets were collected into a Storify® and shared with staff and students (<https://storify.com/HumsEmployable/university-of-Southampton-humstoptips16>)

In order to maintain engagement, Facebook was employed to connect with students at every level. The Coordinator created a 'Peer Mentors' group on Facebook and used it to signpost key information each week. Updates would reach the mentors instantly on their smartphones, making information both easy to access and more efficiently communicated than it would have been by using email. Additionally, mentors were encouraged to use Facebook groups for their own mentees. Such groups could easily arrange meetings with their mentees and the first-year students could immediately contact their mentors if they had a question or problem. The informal nature of Facebook ultimately meant that the mentees felt less intimidated, as it allowed them to view their mentors as peers rather than superiors.

REALIE: Online employability support for students on their Residency Abroad

REALIE (<http://www.realie.org/>) was set up to provide Humanities students with access to employability support during their Residency Abroad (RA). Students on RA are one of our key 'hard to reach' groups, given their distance from campus during one year of their degree. The REALIE website focuses on how the RA experience prepares students for future employment, using three stages - pre-departure (stage one), on residency (stage two) and return (stage three) - offering guidance for each stage. It includes a tool to track development and communicate this to prospective employers. REALIE also contains a blog that posts experiences from current RA students as well as some contributions from alumni to give insight into the role their RA played in their chosen career paths.

REALIE's blog was established with the aim of providing pre-departure (stage one) students with an idea of what their RA might look like and, in turn, to encourage them to think about what skills they might want to develop during their RA. It also provided on-residency (stage two) students with the opportunity to keep track of the skills they were developing during RA through blogging. For stage three students, now returned and back to their Southampton studies, the blogs serve as evidence of their development. Blogs are updated weekly and shared via Mission Employable social media - Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. During summer 2016, interactive content was added to the REALIE site. Stage one students could complete a quiz or read through a checklist and then venture further into the site to find out more. Content was designed to be both visually-stimulating and informative to get these students thinking about the skills they would be gaining on their RA, encouraging them to see their entire RA experience as developmental. These interactive activities were 'advertised' to students during lectures preparing them for their RA, as well as on social media.

Pathbrite.com e-portfolio pilot

Whilst Peer Mentoring and REALIE were targeted to engage new and distance learners respectively, the third student engagement challenge for Mission Employable came from students who felt that they did not need employability support. The majority of these students are highly-capable, have already worked either part-time or through full-time internships and serve on University society committees. These students are often either too busy to stop and reflect, or are not always able to articulate how they are developing their skills through their activity. This leads to a final-year state of 'panic' – they haven't done enough; they don't know what they want to do; they don't know how to approach employers. Pathbrite (www.pathbrite.com) is an e-portfolio platform that enables students to build their own 'story' around their employability experiences. In Pathbrite, the Mission Employable

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team recognised an opportunity to give students a sense of ownership over their skills development by creating personalised portfolios around their curricular, co-curricular and extra-curricular activities. The platform could enhance students' CVs, add content to their LinkedIn profiles and make the speculative application process easier, especially for those students focusing on the creative industries. It is an ideal way to engage those who wish to work independently to develop their skills base: those self-sufficient students who have too many commitments to attend on-campus sessions.

Though Pathbrite is not a social network, it allows Twitter, Facebook, and blog sites to be added to the 'contact' banner at the top of each user's profile. Moreover, users can have more than one of these accounts if needed – for example, if a student wanted to share her/his personal Twitter as well as an account s/he used for a University society. Multiple portfolios can be created within one user profile, giving students the opportunity to link to different skill sets or experiences tailored to an application. However, the unique selling point for encouraging student engagement with Pathbrite is that it is a collation tool. Rather than needing to create brand new content (although this is possible), Pathbrite enables users to bring in existing content hosted elsewhere. This can be anything from a Microsoft Word document to a YouTube video, and allows a student's personality to shine alongside her/his qualifications.

Digital Badges for Employability

Alongside Pathbrite, Mission Employable pinpointed digital badges as an innovative means of enhancing student engagement with employability. Digital credentials provide a supportive framework that will allow students to improve and reflect on their employability skills, offering a sense of ownership and self-direction, whilst encouraging students to gain confidence in recognising and evidencing these skills to employers. In addition, by engaging with digital badges, students are encouraged to develop their digital identity and recognise the value of using digital media for employability in a way that they might not have previously been familiar with. In this way, the process of earning badges is as valuable as the completed badge itself.

We identified a variety of ways that digital badges could be incorporated into Mission Employable: for example, as one overarching 'Employability' badge or as a collection of badges earned across the degree programme. Badges would be implemented alongside the three established Humanities Employability modules, complementing their content and ensuring the direct engagement of students beyond compulsory attendance at lectures. Alternatively, Mission Employable might incorporate digital badges in a more targeted way as part of the Peer Mentoring scheme, enabling participants to earn a badge for their mentoring that could then be displayed on their digital portfolio. Certainly, there are challenges and obstacles in implementing this form of engagement, primarily as digital badges are a relatively new concept and are unfamiliar to both students and employers. To combat this, sessions on digital badges have been incorporated into the compulsory Humanities Employability modules. Through these sessions, students will gain an understanding of digital badges both within the University and externally, encouraging them to take control of their employability development more broadly.

Incorporating digital badges into the Mission Employable initiative will undoubtedly be a reflective process of refining and improving. Although the experience of other institutions does provide some insight, there is no long-standing successful model that can be followed. Despite this, digital badges lend themselves specifically to crediting the vast and diverse range of skills that employability encompasses, particularly for students of Humanities. They will allow students to tailor and direct their own learning, 'knowing, growing and showing' their employability as they earn and display these digital credentials.

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Key Findings

The use of digital platforms for student engagement has produced mixed results for Mission Employable. While we have seen increased engagement across the project from two of our 'hard to reach' groups, new starters and Residency Abroad students, the highly-capable and self-sufficient students have remained elusive. Although social media now constitute a core engagement tool for the project, the more defined platforms of Pathbrite and digital badges have required more explanation, and more time investment by both students and staff. These platforms highlight the need for ease of use to be a high priority for any digital engagement strategy. Nevertheless, showcase platforms like Pathbrite and digital badges will become more prominent as the job market continues to digitise. A lesson learned through this project is that it is essential to make legacy explicit within the learning process. If a student believes that by getting involved with a project like Mission Employable and by investing time in her/his digital presence, s/he will be rewarded when entering the world of work, being far more likely to engage.

The authors acknowledge that Pathbrite.com, Facebook, Twitter and Instagram are all registered trademarks.

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