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ENGAGING INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS TO DEVELOP THEIR EMPLOYABILITY: A CASE STUDY OF A BRITISH UNIVERSITY

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Engaging international students to develop their employability: A case study of a British University

Graduate employability has been widely debated by policy-makers and academics (Pegg et al., 2012); indeed, enhancing graduate employability is a priority for many stakeholders in higher education (HE) (O’Leary, 2017). A theoretical framework is essential for the effective evaluation of employability but there is a wide range of definitions of employability coexisting in current literature (Williams, et al 2016). Waters (2009) points out that little reference is made to the increasingly international dimensions of HE. In reality, Jones (2016) argues that the relationship between internationalisation and the development of graduate employability skills are largely ignored at present. Multiple studies show close interests in supporting international students to develop employability skills and consistently report that students were aware of a range of opportunities available to develop their employability but engagement was variable due to issues surrounding language barriers, cultural differences and perceived relevance (e.g. Huang et al 2014; Miller et al., 2016; Nilsson et al., 2004; Popadjuk and Arthur, 2014; Shen and Herr, 2004; Singaravelu et al., 2005).

There has been unprecedented growth of social media and other Web 2.0 technologies over the past decade (Tess, 2013), with many younger people tending to take social media for granted (Benson et al, 2014). Students raised with pervasive technology are believed to have developed skills and ways of thinking that require new approaches to education. Constantinides and Stagno (2011) propose that it is attractive to engage with social media in the settings of the HE. In particular, the use of social media as an education tool to promote student engagement is increasingly attracting researchers’ attention, and many of them (e.g. Hagler, 2013; Chen et al, 2010; Graham, 2014; Junco et al, 2011; Kabilan et al, 2010; Matzat and Vrieling, 2016) argue that social media can benefit student learning both inside and outside the classroom. However, researchers (e.g. Benson et al., 2014; Zekiri, 2016) are also questioning how social media can be used 'effectively'. A large gap remains in understanding student preferences regarding social media in courses (Towner and Klemz, 2016) and how its use across specific groups such as international students (Saw et al., 2013).

Against the above background, drawing on data collected from international students at all levels of study across a range of degree programmes, the aim of this research was to investigate whether social media can be used as an effective mechanism to disseminate training opportunities and engage international students in initiatives to develop their employability while they study in the UK. More specifically, three objectives were identified (1) to examine international students awareness, actual use and perceived usefulness of the university offers of different social media platforms; (2) to examine the performance of the university offers and (3) to provide sensible recommendations to career and employability services to enhance the use social media to support international students.

A three-part questionnaire survey was designed based on a detailed literature review (Brooks et al., 2012; Huang et al., 2014; Huang and Turner, 2017; Pegg et al., 2012): it captured demographic information, social media behaviour in relation to the university employability activities, as well as capturing their general social media behaviour (importance and performance). The questionnaire was piloted with 10 international students who were studying in Faculty of Business was undertaken, leading to minor changes / clarification to three questions. The finalised questionnaire was then uploaded to Qualtrics. Two emails with the survey link were sent to all the international students at the University to encourage their participation. The online survey started from March and finished at the first week of June 2017.

In total 310 questionnaires were returned with 278 completed in full. International students from 24 countries participated; they were studying at four of the five faculties at the University and represented 48 programmes. Among them, 142 respondents were male and 136 were female. More than half of them (n=159) were in age group of 22 to 30 years old, more than one-third of them (n=117) were undertaking Level 6 study at the university.

This survey provided following key findings:

- 1) Regarding use of different types of social media platforms, Facebook, Instagram and Youtube were the top three platforms. Although Wechat was just outside the top three platforms, it was the most often used social media site among the international students. This might be because the largest number of international students in the University were Chinese and Wechat was very popular among them;
- 2) Low number of international students were aware of different social media platforms offered by Career & Employability services and their faculties. Furthermore, work opportunities (mean = 4.02) and volunteering opportunities (mean = 4.00) received their highest awareness based on a Likert scale of 7 which 1 means no awareness and 7 means fully aware and attend;
- 3) The respondents' actual use of social media to engage employability was slightly disappointing as 'I frequently check the information posted by social media sites' (mean = 4.03) and 'I carefully read the information posted by different social media sites.' (mean = 3.91) when we explored to what extent their behaviour was consistent with the statement which 1 meant least consistent and 7 meant most consistent.
- 4) In terms of the perceived usefulness of the social media platforms from the university, the three highest useful functions perceived by the respondents were, to enhance the interaction with people (mean = 4.71), to know internship opportunities (mean = 4.64), and to know placement opportunities (mean = 4.59).
- 5) Twenty-three attributes were used to gather the respondents' perceived importance when they engage employability opportunities offered by social media platforms and their evaluation of the university's performance. Mean scores for the attributes in importance and performance analyses ranged from 4.33 to 4.95.

In conclusion, although the university made great efforts to use different social media platforms to engage students to develop their employability, the international students' awareness of such platforms was low and their actual use of such platforms was disappointing. The social media platforms were perceived most useful for interaction with people and job/placement opportunities. The importance-performance analysis provided four strategies for the university career & employability services to adopt in order to better use social media to engage international students to develop their employability.

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