

Facebook is 'social glue' for university freshers

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The first few weeks at university can be a difficult time for freshers as they attempt to settle in to their new academic and social life.

Researchers at the University of Leicester have found that a high proportion of freshers use the internet to smooth the settling-in process.

The University is now exploring ways of using internet platforms that most students are familiar with -- social networking sites and podcasting -- to help new arrivals get their bearings.

And it is looking into how these technological mediums might also be used to improve the student experience beyond the first few weeks at university.

The work is focussing on two areas:

-- Building on the findings of a study that has concluded that "Facebook is part of the social glue that helps students settle into university life".

-- Launching a new website that provides podcasts of students talking about their experiences of settling in to university life, covering everything from finding accommodation to coping with debt. This is available at www.StartingUni.info

The University of Leicester's own Facebook network lists 10,000 members, including current and past students and staff. A research project, funded by the Registrar and Secretary of the University and its

Teaching Enhancement Fund, was launched to find out more about how students were using Facebook at university, and how it helps them integrate into university life.

The study was conducted by Dr. Jane Wellens from the University's Staff Development Centre, Dr Clare Madge from the Department of Geography, Dr Tristram Hooley from CRAC: The Career Development Organisation and Dr Julia Meek from Lifecycle Evaluation.

The researchers state: "We know little about how this phenomenon impacts on the student experience and, in particular, if and how it facilitates new students' social integration into University life. Our project focused on how pre-registration engagement with the University of Leicester Facebook network influences students' post-registration social networks and their understanding of the University. It also explored whether there is any role for social networking tools to be used by University support services and academic departments to enhance the social and academic integration of students."

A survey of 221 first year students conducted between April and June this year found that more than half (55 per cent) had joined Facebook to make new friends prior to entering university, while a further 43 per cent joined immediately after starting university. Nearly three quarters said Facebook had played an important part in helping them to settle in at university.

Over a third of respondents also said they used Facebook to discuss academic work with other students on a weekly basis, and more than half responded positively to the idea of using Facebook for more formal teaching and learning – although only 7 per cent had actually done so. Many suggested ways in which Facebook could be used, such as providing social support for students in departments and informing students about changing lecture times.

But the survey also found that 41 per cent of students were against being contacted directly by tutors via Facebook. A report on the preliminary findings warns that the university will need to tread carefully if it wants to use Facebook to communicate with students for administrative or teaching and learning purposes.

The researchers say: "The survey data illustrate that Facebook is part of the 'social glue' that helps students settle into university life, that keeps the student body together as a community and which aids in communication (especially about social events) between the student body. However, care must be taken not to over privilege Facebook: it is clearly only one aspect of student's social networking practices and clearly face-to-face relationships and interactions remain significant.

"A clear picture is emerging whereby the students thought the use of Facebook was most importantly for social reasons, not for formal teaching purposes. Although it was sometimes used informally for learning purposes by students, they were not overly keen on the idea of being contacted by their tutors via Facebook. Just under half of the respondents considered it to be acceptable for the University to be contacting them for teaching, marketing or pastoral matters but less than one third were happy to be contacted for administrative matters."

The team that conducted the research is now beginning a second phase of the study involving in-depth interviews to explore ways in which the university might subtly use Facebook and other web-based platforms to enhance the student experience, without making students feel like their virtual social space is being invaded.

The link to the project site is [www.le.ac.uk/geography/research ...
cts_madge_FULSE.html](http://www.le.ac.uk/geography/research_projects/madge_FULSE.html)

Source: University of Leicester

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