

# Chapter 11

## Social Media and Higher Education: Direct and Indirect Marketing

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### ABSTRACT

*The constant rise in tuition fees has created increasing pressure for British universities to augment the range of marketing tools used to attract students in competition with both domestic and overseas institutions. This chapter investigates the role of social media as a communication and marketing tool for Higher Education Institutions in the UK. Social media is a powerful tool for both direct and indirect marketing, and is highly relevant for universities targeting youngsters who belong to the so-called Generation Y. After presenting the background for social media marketing and higher education, we investigate whether the use of social media as a marketing tool has been effective in raising awareness of British universities. To do so, we collect data on the use of social media by HEIs (in the UK and in the USA for comparison), as well as data on students' response to these new marketing strategies. Unlike many other organisations, it seems that social media play a positive role in promoting British Universities, although the evidence suggests that they still tend to use social media too much like more traditional forms of marketing and PR.*

### INTRODUCTION

*The University I attended caught my attention via Facebook. If it had not used this means of marketing I would have never heard of it.*

The commodification of Higher Education in the United Kingdom is a relatively recent phenomenon. In September 1998, for the first time since World War II, the UK government paved the way for the introduction of student tuition fees of no more than £1,000 per year. Thus, as well as

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competing with each other, UK Universities have also had to compete with Universities which are not part of the British state University system, including both for-profit Universities (such as BPP University, the London School of Business and Finance, etc.) and not-for-profit Universities (such as Richmond University, the American International University in London, where both authors are currently employed). Since 1998 British Universities have increasingly been subject to market forces in their search for increasing streams of revenue. However, one result of UK devolution has been that the home countries (Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland) have been able to set their own tuition fees independently from Westminster. Currently Scotland has no tuition fees, but levies a charge after graduation.

In January 2004, England saw an increase in University tuition fees up to £3,000 per year. The Browne Review of 2010 proposed the complete removal of the tuition fees cap, but this was considered to be politically sensitive and not implemented. Instead, in 2012 the tuition fee cap was raised to £9,000 per year. Currently this is charged by 64 British universities, while the remaining 59 charge at least £6,000. Increasing tuition fees have created growing pressure for English Universities (in particular) to make use of a full range of marketing tools to attract students in competition with universities and other Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) both in the United Kingdom and, increasingly, overseas. As well as the more traditional forms of marketing, British Universities have continued to spend more time and money on improving their websites, while in the past few years they have also turned their attentions to the complementary Web 2.0 tools including the various forms of social media. In this chapter we consider whether or not the use of social media as a marketing tool has been effective in raising awareness of English Universities, and hence increasing their revenue streams.

## **SOCIAL MEDIA AND MARKETING**

It is well-documented that the origins of the internet began with the introduction of ARPANET by the US Department of Defence in 1969 (Leiner et al., 2009; Leiner et al., 1997). Although e-mail originated in 1977, it was nearly 20 years before it became available to the general public as a medium of communication. However, the internet as we have come to know it probably began in 1991 with a text-based, menu-driven access known as Gopher which, unlike previous versions, required no knowledge of computer coding or the command interface. That same year saw the establishment of the World-Wide Web (www). By 1994 the internet was already undergoing a process of commercialization, especially in the United States. The US Senate and House began to provide information servers for the general public. Around that same time shopping malls and banks were among the first to spot the commercial potential of the internet and began to establish a virtual presence. Pizza Hut offered online ordering and First Virtual opened as the original cyberbank. Companies such as America Online (AOL) were making the internet increasingly accessible to the general public via a subscription service. The move from dial-up (telephone access using a modem) to broadband over the next decade or so served to accelerate accessibility to the internet for the general public.

For many years the internet has offered a way for companies and individuals to provide information, including marketing, to a worldwide public audience. However, as a form of mass communication, the internet remains relatively new, with a great deal remaining to be explored. But it has become ever more important in the past five years, almost ubiquitous in the lives of most people. This ubiquity has been enhanced with the advent of social media, which has provided new and ever-more accessible ways to join the virtual world. Newer tools such as Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn, as well as Vine, Pinterest, WhatsApp

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