

Enhancement of Student Exchange Programs through Social Networking Websites

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ABSTRACT

This paper suggests use of social networking sites (SNS) in making student exchange program or study abroad programs effective. Aim of this research is to promote use of SNS. It will help in promoting awareness about student exchange programs and successful marketing of such programs across the world. SNS help in enhancing better working of academic institutions or universities offering student exchange program in terms of query handling and networking. However, most of the academic institutions or universities offering student exchange program are not using SNS for smooth functioning of such programs because they think that students lack interest in this tool. In fact, social media can bring together various stake holders in education from different parts of the world. This paper highlights effectiveness of social networking sites for educational institutions and universities offering student exchange program to share and impart the latest information to information seekers all over the world. SNS reduce communication gap between international students, faculty and university/ institution administration and motivates them to interact. This is a qualitative research and data has been collected through online questionnaire. Analysis has been done based on the mean scores of the data collected.

Key Words: Social Media, Student Exchange Program, Effectiveness, Awareness, Marketing, Social Networking Sites, Interaction and Motivation.

INTRODUCTION

Education now has become a wind which knows no borders. In the year 2010/11, the number of international students in the United States, increased to 723,277 students, making it a 32% increase since the year 2000/01 (National Center for Education Statistics). Promotion of higher education resulted in student exchange program and students and stakeholders in education became more interested in expertise from all over the world. This led to designing of tailor made courses which are suitable for students from different parts of the world (Associated Press, 2011). Use of advanced technology in international universities and academic institutions promote awareness, better marketing techniques, query handling and networking which are a must for success of student exchange program. Pillar of student exchange program is connectivity with international students, alumni, faculty, university/ institution and home and host university/ institution (Lavanya, T, 2011). Key players in facilitating such activities are intranet, internet and social media.

This paper is based on qualitative research, online questionnaire was floated and analysis has been made by considering the mean scores. This research paper promotes use of SNS for promoting student exchange programs. SNS acts like a bridge for communication amongst the various parties involved in education. It has piece of information for all. Effectiveness and promotion of use of SNS for student exchange programs was studied through analyzing questions on satisfaction of international students from the program and social media to be a good platform for international students, faculty and university administration interaction. However, cost effectiveness and effective ways for further development in advancing education through SNS has not been discussed in this paper.

SNS has the ability to efficiently and effectively use web-based and mobile technologies to facilitate interactive dialogue among these parties involved in education. Mentioned below is the comparison table of traditional media and social media

Table 1: Traditional v/s new social media:

Traditional Media	Social Media
One sending source, multiple passive receivers (newspaper, magazines, television channels).	One or many sending sources, multiple active receivers. (blogs, Instant messages, social networking sites like Facebook).
Communication through technology texts, pictures, images and concepts (example- television, telephone)	Real human communication (social networking sites, blogs)
One sided interaction (examples- television, newspapers)	Co-operative and participatory (example- online workshops)
No problem because of electricity problem or unavailability of internet connection	Dependent on electricity and internet connection.
Partially democratic	Fully democratic
Instant feedback is not available	Instant feedback
Marketing cost is higher	Marketing cost is comparatively low
Uncontrolled marketing	Controlled marketing (open source)
One to many dialogue	Many to many dialogue
Distance is problem	Distance is not a problem
Privacy is maintained	Privacy may be encroached
Higher degree of rewards and punishment	Lesser degree of rewards and punishment because of lack of evidence and legal regulations
Old media tools: books, journalism, music, newspapers, magazines, radio, television, telephone, film, photography, art etc.	New media tools: ebooks, wikis, blogs, Pandora, Ezines, podcasts, full episodes on web, VOIP, armature videos on web, Picasa, Flickr, museums on web.

Source: (Christian, 2003), (Klein, 2001). (Friedman & Friedman, 2008)

Kietzmann rightly says “social media introduce substantial and pervasive changes to communication between organizations, communities, and individuals” (Kietzmann, et.al, 2011). Social media brings together various stake holders in education across the world and provide them a platform to interact and discuss. But social media can only be effectively used if the institutions and universities understand the expectations of international students for successful student exchange program.

Expectations of International Students:

With the popularity of concept of treating international students as customers of university/ institution, the administration of such universities and institutions is changing their approach to keep up with the pace. For this reason, such universities and institutions check the quality of students they are admitting and also they put a cap on number of students to ensure better teaching and individual student development. Earlier their concentration was on inside out approach that is they thought what the faculty felt was good for the students and those facilities were provided to students which the administration thought were better for them but now the concept has changed the universities and institutions have adopted outside in approach where suggestions from international students and stake holders in education are welcomed and effort is made by universities and institutions to fulfill their

expectations. (Padlee, Kamaruddin & Baharun, 2010) Student exchange programs are successful only if program content, faculty, dedication of university/ institution administration to achieve excellence in quality education and international student involvement and satisfaction ratio is high. In order to top the ranking charts, such universities and institutions offering student exchange program promote commercialization and competition to enroll large number of international students from different parts of the world. Earlier methods of enrolling international students were limited to personal approach but with the help of SNS virtual interaction and picking up quality students for the program can be ensured. Home universities act as intermediary in this process; it recommends students and on the basis of this host universities enroll them in specific programs. It is a general practice of international students and their parents to research about the university or institution offering such programs. International student and their parents have expectations related to quality education, teaching pedagogy and facilities extended by university/ institution administration. Their first resort to check on availability of such facilities is usually a search engine say Google or Yahoo and then they try to get the reviews about the program on social networking websites like Facebook and Twitter.

Some quick facts about social media usage are:

- Facebook is the primary method for communication by college students in the U.S. (Harris, 2008). In June 2011 Facebook had 750 Million users. (techcrunch.com, 2011)
- Out of all time spent online in the US social networking accounts for 22% (Blog.nielson.com)
- In December 2009 , Twitter processed more than one billion tweets and averages almost 40 million tweets per day.
- Australia ranks highest in Facebook usage with over 9 million users spending almost 9 hours per month on the site. (socialmedianews.com)

When we talk about competition among enrolling international students, universities and academic institutions keep the most updated track of their students, to be specific, cradle to grave information of all their students including the international students. They do so because it is the most effective channel of recruiting international students. International students have certain common general expectations from student exchange program. These expectations are related to course content, availability of faculty member, prompt reply of queries by academic advisor, good mess and dormitory services, better library services, student union centre, cleanliness and greenery at the campus, sight seeing facility, shuttle facility, hospital on campus, banking facility on campus, good internet connection at the campus, security on campus, industrial visit and visit of industry expert to be arranged by the university/ institution administration as a part of the student exchange program. When the international students get satisfied, they get involved in the educational process and they end up promoting the student exchange program they undertook.

Potential Use of Social Media for International Students and Other Parties Involved in Education:

SNS provides the most convenient platform to the alumni and current international students as well as prospective international students to interact and share their experiences related to program. University/ institution websites have a link to their Facebook, Twitter or Linked In page, international students simply join the respective pages and they can interact with alumni, current international students, university/ institution staff and faculty members. In this way, they get the most authentic reviews about the program and university/ institution. International students develop trust and they relate to the people who interact with them on such forums. International students post pictures of their sight seeing trips and university/ institution life which motivates other students to take up the student exchange program. This also promotes international student loyalty and international student retention. On this Campbell

(Campbell, 2009) says social media is “a type of website, application or communications vehicle where people connect with one another; discuss and interact; share content and ideas; and build relationships.”

SNS promotes transparency and provides ability to express thoughts and opinions. It is cheaper, time convenient, easy to use and has people from all age group using it. International students access social network websites anytime and at any place on their laptops, I-pads and mobile phones. International students and their parents prefer going with word of mouth. Who can be a well wisher other than a friend? “A decision-making process by potential student is often influenced by “significant others” such as friends, parents, counselors, other students, teachers and university admission officers, internet, mass media and sometime the league tables.” (Padlee, Kamaruddin & Baharun, 2010) Recommendation of a program is always welcomed by international students if it comes from a friend or acquaintance. Positive or negative comments about the program or university/ institution by other students impact the decision of aspiring international students to select a particular student exchange program. Involvement of faculty members and staff on social networking sites build in confidence and trust of international students and they feel motivated to get involved in educational process. The various uses of SNS helps in promoting student exchange program and results in smooth functioning of student exchange program with respect to parties concerned, such uses are:

International students: SNS provide a platform to international students to interact with university/ institution administration prior to entering the foreign country, this helps them get comfortable in advance with the culture shock they may receive. Students feel comfortable and involved in education because they feel connected when they interact with faculty, administration and alumni through SNS. Lot of time is saved because queries are answered online. Students feel relaxed, refreshed and connected with family and friends back home.

Faculty members: Faculty members get to know international students better and help them get involved in education by motivating them in informal manner through SNS. Learning is made simpler and easier through informal discussion.

Student representatives: Planning a meet becomes easier and lot of time is saved through use of social networking sites. All the students feel connected because they get messages and updates all the time.

Administration: University/ institution opt for Facebook hours to provide online and timely support to international students and other interested parties including prospective students. It helps in establishing faster channel of communication. International students belonging to countries with high power distance feel comfortable asking their queries through this technique. It saves time and money and bring in efficiency. Sudden change in climate or cancellation of classes or change in location of classes is informed to international students through Facebook and Twitter because they keep checking updates on such sites frequently.

Host and Home University/ Institution: Marketing of student exchange program is conducted by organizations effectively through SNS due to large number of target audience available on it. It helps in maintaining connection with current and prospective students and alumni.

Friends and Relatives: International students intimate their well being and share pictures and videos of their university/ institution conveniently with their friends and relatives and stay connected with them through SNS.

Stakeholders: Government and trustees of university/ institution get updates and latest information about events at university/ administration through SNS and queries are also answered on the same. It saves time and effort as calling or personal appearance is not required.

Prospective Students: SNS serve as treat for prospective students. Sitting at home they get a feel of how it would be for them at the desired university/ institution. Alumni and current students post pictures so they get to know the destination and university/ institution. At the same time they ask such students about their experience and this helps prospective students in making a decision. Queries related to future cultural shock are resolved and prospective students feel at ease due to prior interaction with current students, alumni and administration.

Cultural Groups: It is convenient for cultural groups to plan a meet and pass on the message at the speed of light because all the students are already connected on SNS through mobile devices.

Alumni: Alumni donate, spread good word about the program and institution on SNS, this expresses their loyalty and help in getting more students enrolled in the program.

Third Party: Parents, relatives and friends of prospective and current students and alumni, media persons and other agencies are interested in updates of student exchange program and university/ institution, they refer to SNS for required information.

Strategies for Effective Adoption of Social Media for International Students:

Understanding the popularity of social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter among international students, it is important that universities make effective use of this technique. For example, Purdue University, West Lafayette, Indiana, USA used social media tool for attracting international students to enroll in various programs. To their surprise, as per the report of Journal & Courier, Purdue had 7,934 international students enrolled in September 2011 making it 17.3 percent from the year 2010 and nearly 45 % from the year 2008. Mike Brzezinski, dean of international programs, believe this growth is due to positive experiences of international students, word of mouth and Purdue's support services. This is the greatest example of use of skillful role of social media in promoting student exchange programs. (Associated Press, 2011)

It is essential to understand how to use SNS for promoting student exchange program and smooth running of student exchange program. International students, alumni, faculty members, university/ institution administration must firstly understand laws for posting information online. Only that information must be shared which the user is authorized to disseminate. It must be kept in mind actions of stake holders in education and student exchange program must be ethical and must not hurt the sentiments of others ensuring no infringement of law and respecting privacy of others. Goodwill of university or institution offering student exchange program may be built on social media but bad name of the same is earned faster on social media. The reason behind it is that the message is passed on to large network of people on SNS (Argenti & Druckenmiller, 2010). Based on the literature reviewed so far, this study recommends some steps for effective use of SNS in marketing student exchange programs, however, there is scope of further research on these steps.

The four step social media marketing strategy for promotion of student exchange program may be:

Step 1: understanding the expectations of international students from student exchange program.

Step 2: choosing appropriate social media platform or social networking site like Facebook or Twitter.

Step 3: Listing objectives of student exchange program (international student specific)

Step 4: Posting other relevant and useful information related to program and university/ institution.

There are both advantages and disadvantages of social networking sites. Tagging of photos or sharing of photos may result into dispute because international students may feel that their privacy is being intruded. While sharing educational content law of copyright may be an issue and international students may end up getting involved in copyright infringement. It is therefore necessary for alumni, international students, university/ institution staff and faculty members to read the laws related to sharing information on social media to ensure no infringement of law. "Much of the studies of privacy online focus on risk, rather than understanding the necessity of private spaces for young people where they can socialize away from the watching eyes of parents, teachers or marketers." (Marwick, et al, 2010)

Conclusion

The communication tools which were used earlier had limited accessibility and interaction facility. The old social media tools like television, newspapers, photography etc did not provide the platform for faculty and students to interact. Such tools were based on one sided communication techniques. New social media tools bring together international students from similar area of interest and provide them a platform to interact with the subject experts. A message from university/ institution administration or faculty member may be circulated informally with the international students and they can have easy access to useful information. For example, if there is a presentation next day and latest information related to the subject is available online then the faculty or other international student may share the same on social networking website say Facebook. All other international students may use that information in their presentation for more discussion on contemporary issue.

Research Methodology:

While researching for my PhD thesis titled "Success of Student Exchange Program with Reference to Student as Customer (SAC) model: An Overview of International Students' Expectation, Satisfaction and Involvement in Education", an online questionnaire containing 65 questions was circulated to alumni and current students of student exchange programs at various universities and institutions. Five questions related to satisfaction, promotion of use and expectation of international students from social media out of the 65 questions were used for this research paper. Factor analysis was conducted on the responses collected but more satisfactory results were derived through qualitative analysis.

Analysis:

Mean scores were derived from the data collected. For example, international students were asked if they were satisfied with the student exchange program. International students replied positively to this, we can say so because the mean score derived was very high that is 4.49. This opinion of international students was backed by excellent course content and delivery of lectures, availability of faculty to discuss contemporary issues and prompt reply to international students' query by academic advisor. The international students were satisfied with academic facilities extended towards them by the university/ institution administration. However, international students expected more and better use of social networking websites for interaction and involvement in education. We can say so because when international students were asked if they thought that social media may provide a good platform to international students for interaction with faculty, then the mean score derived was 3.89 which is on the higher side. If the university/ institution make the availability of faculty members on SNS then interaction will be welcomed by both faculty members and international students. Similarly, when international students were asked if social media will promote their involvement in education, the mean score derived was 3.82 which is again on a higher side. It means that international students will feel more connected to stakeholders in education and will promote academic activities on social media and will thus get involved in education process. It can be said that there is a room for success of student exchange program through SNS if promoted by the university or academic institution.

International students were asked if they thought they may feel satisfied with the student exchange program through the use of SNS, again the mean score was on higher side that is 3.80 which means most of them believed that international student satisfaction may be derived from student exchange program if social media is involved in the educational process. International students were also asked if they thought social media leads to increased expectations of international students from students exchange program, then the mean score derived was 3.78 which is again on the higher side. It can be said that on SNS comparison is made with other universities and academic institution offering student exchange program and international students compare their experiences with others, so they expect more from the program as well as the university. International students were asked if social media acts as a platform for international students to express their rage, the mean score was 3.57 which highlighted mixed opinion of international students on the question because they are aware of the disadvantages of social media and most of them were concerned about the brand image or reputation of the university or academic institution so they were likely not to express their rage about the program on SNS.

Conclusion:

The first reason why social media is not still fully adopted by international students is because of the cost constraint and internet connectivity in their respective areas of residence. Secondly, cultures with high power distance feel that social media may promote commercialization of education and international students will act more like customers of the university or academic institution which is not usually accepted by faculty members. Most of the countries are not in favor of excessive use of social media, for example, China where Facebook is banned. Fourthly, there are issues related to social media like privacy concerns and difficulty in keeping a check on information sharing. But we cannot ignore the advantages of social media for promoting student exchange program and resulting in success of student exchange program with its unique features like easy to use, convenient to use anytime, large audience, boundary less flow of relevant information, seamless interaction among stake holders in education from across the world and great platform for faculty, administration and international student interaction. Understanding all pros and cons of social media in success of student exchange program we recommend more and more use of SNS for interaction of faculty, administration and international students with training guidelines related to dos and don'ts already explained and shared with the parties involved.

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