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**Research Article**

**Student identities in transition: social media experiences, curation and implications for Higher Education**

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**Abstract**

Students increasingly arrive at university with a range of existing social media presences and the use of social media may vary in a range of contexts, from socialising, informal peer support, and formal academic tasks to building complex networks of potential employers and contacts. Research conducted as part of the University of Edinburgh's Managing Your Digital Footprint research project, funded under the Principal's Teaching Award Scheme, has been investigating how students across the University use social media, how they manage and curate their online presences, and the extent to which they encounter both risks and opportunities.

The research approach included the issuing of two surveys (n=587 and n=870) from across the student body (undergraduates, postgraduates, online distance learners, and PhD students). The findings have provided a rich picture of the student experience and how students are managing their digital identities. In addition, ethnographic tracing work was undertaken with students (n=6) which has explored their personal approach and conceptualisation of their digital footprints in more depth.

In this paper we examine the research data in relation to student identities and their transition into and out of the university environment. In addition we will focus on how students conceptualise and manage their online presence, and how this aligns with professional social media best practices. The discussion

will conclude with an examination of possible implications for using social media in teaching and learning environments and how universities can support students to effectively manage their online presences.

## **Introduction**

The concept of "transitions" has taken a prominent place on the agenda of many higher education institutions (HEIs) and is the current enhancement theme of the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) (2014a, 2014b). There has also been recognition that HEIs need to focus on providing digital skills training and support for students both for their studies and future employability.

The University of Edinburgh launched a Digital Footprint campaign in 2014-2015 which directly contributed to the enhancement theme as well as addressing an increasingly important digital skills gap. The campaign provided information and planned activities for students, especially those transitioning into and out of the University. The campaign was supported and informed by a parallel research project, focusing on the wider strategic context of embedding social media into learning and teaching environments and ensuring that risk management and appropriate support is available to staff and students.

The following discussion focuses on the relevant findings of the Managing Your Digital Footprint research, around current student use of social media, approaches to managing their representation of self, and their experiences of both negative behaviours, and positive support and opportunities in these spaces.

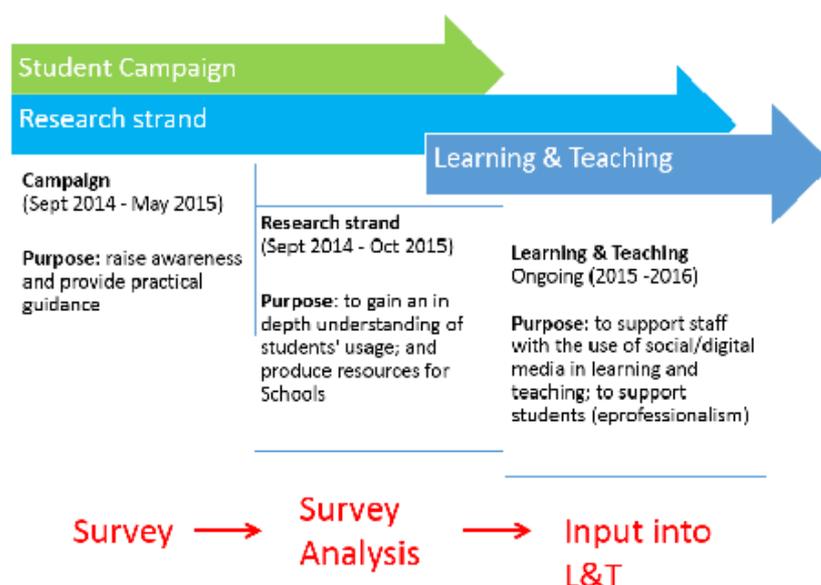
We also discuss how current student practices have implications for the use of social media in teaching and learning contexts. In particular we consider the role of eprofessionalism (Chester et al. 2013), professional bodies' guidelines, student support services (Nelson et al. 2006), and the use of social media in formal teaching and learning contexts (Hallam Goodband 2012), as well as some of the challenges and risks associated with informal social media use in HEIs (e.g. Student Facebook Groups) (Osborne and Connelly 2015).

## **Digital Footprint Campaign (2014-2015)**

The campaign was a cross-University collaborative venture with the Institute for Academic Development (IAD) leading the campaign alongside collaborators from EDINA (a Jisc centre for digital expertise and online delivery, based at the University of Edinburgh), the Careers Service, Information Services, Student Information Points and the students association (EUSA). The campaign targeted ~32,000 students via various activities, including surveys, competitions, workshops, promotional video and materials, guidelines and via social media.

The campaign was situated in a larger strategic framework, which included a research strand, and a learning and teaching strand (see figure 1). The intention of the campaign was to address an already-identified digital skills gap and focus on enabling students to manage an effective online presence which would be of benefit in terms of employability, research and impact, and personal branding. The team were keen to ensure this campaign was not merely a social media awareness or promotion campaign, hence the branding of ‘Digital Footprint’, which we defined as:

“the data you leave behind when you go online. It's what you've said, what others have said about you, where you've been, images you're tagged in, personal information, social media profiles and much more”.



**Figure 1. Strategic Vision**

In order to increase awareness and impact, the campaign marketing strategy included a custom designed logo which was used across the University in different formats, including on plasma screens, posters, resources and in workshops. The use of the logo and branding was developed further in semester two, where student quotes were extracted from the survey data and disseminated via social media. The authentic ‘student voice’ provided advice on what it means to manage a digital footprint and was a valuable contribution to the success of the campaign (see figure 2). The quotes are also available as open educational resources on the Digital Footprint website ([www.ed.ac.uk/iad/digitalfootprint](http://www.ed.ac.uk/iad/digitalfootprint)).



**Figure 2. Quote, CC BY NC**

The campaign was well received, with over 32 workshops reaching 1,000 participants; ~2,069 views of the promotional video; 5,144 visits to the website; 2,806 blog views; and a growing number of Facebook and Twitter followers. This response demonstrated a clear demand for support and advice across the University and, as a result, the Institute for Academic Development launched a mainstreamed Digital Footprint service in AY 2015-2016. Recently (late 2015), EDINA also received funding to pilot an external Digital Footprint Consultancy service building on continued external demand in this area. Both services are drawing from the research findings in order to support students and staff to better manage an effective online presence (digital footprint), and to better understand and respond to the benefits and risks of embedding social media and similar online tools into teaching and learning at the University of Edinburgh and in other HEIs and organisations.

## **Research Methodology**

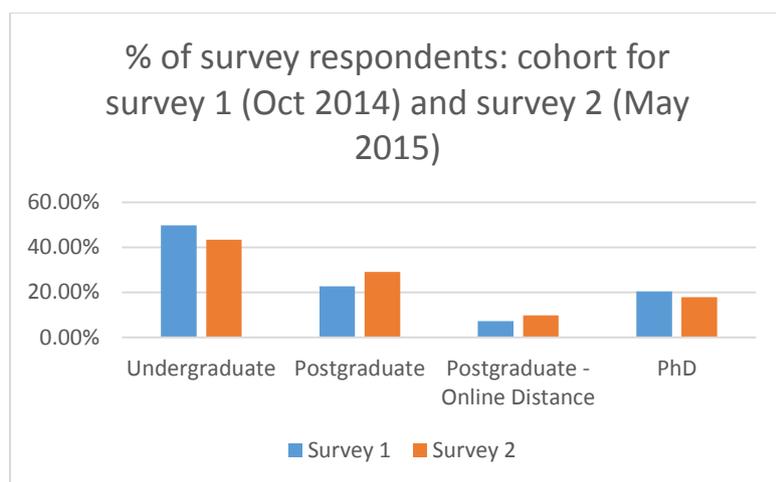
The Digital Footprint research project commenced in September 2014 and was funded by the University of Edinburgh's Principal's Teaching Award Scheme (PTAS). The research ran in parallel to the Digital Footprint campaign (2014-2015). Ethics approval was sought for data collection of two University-wide surveys via the Central Surveys Team, and for ethnographic tracing and interviews of a small set of volunteers, via the School of Education.

The first survey was issued three weeks after the campaign launched in Oct 2014 (587 responses). The second survey was issued in May 2015 (870 responses). Both surveys included quantitative and qualitative questions exploring student experience and reflections on social media and online identity. Whilst most questions were repeated in the second survey some slight alterations were made, based on findings from 'tracks and traces' workshops and the results of the first survey. This included a modification of the list of social media tools (including the addition of Yik Yak), and additional questions on: social media guidance and whether this existed in programme/course handbooks; whether

courses/programmes used social media; whether students would like greater use of social media; and what experiences they had had with social media in learning and teaching spaces.

Surveys were issued to a cross-section of the student population to ensure appropriate representation from different disciplines, demographic profiles and cohort type (undergraduates, postgraduates, online distance learners, and PhD researchers). Each survey was issued to approximately a third of the overall student population (~10,000) via the Bristol Online Survey tool. The representation of students and answers were similar in both surveys (see figure 3). Whilst the survey was issued to a broad range of students, the research team would note their caution of drawing over-generalised conclusions based on the survey data and especially the interview data, as many of those attracted to participate already had a stronger awareness of managing their digital footprint than may be representative of the interest and behaviour of the wider student body.

Analysis of the survey data is ongoing and preliminary findings are presented in this paper. Future plans include further research publications, as well as re-issuing of the survey, in order to capture longitudinal cultural changes and to ensure that the University continues to provide targeted and timely support for students transitioning into and out of the University (Nelson et al. 2006). Correlating 'digital footprint' research with an understanding of the wider discourse around 'transitions' (Nelson et al. 2006) and 'identity management' (Tobbell et al. 2010; O'Shea 2014; boyd 2014), is enabling the University of Edinburgh to take a holistic approach to supporting staff and students which is grounded in both local empirical data and current educational research.



**Figure 3. Percentage of respondents to each survey, by cohort.**

In addition to the surveys, we held a series of fifteen unstructured interviews with six students. Participants were selected from those indicating their willingness to discuss their digital footprint in more detail (survey 1 - October 2014). Participants (who were given a small financial incentive for their

substantial time) were able to withdraw at any point and two chose to do this, with a third only participating in one interview due to their lack of a digital footprint. All interviewees were provided with an information sheet and signed a consent form. Each participant was interviewed three times (except participant 3 and participant 7) and these were completed over a four month period, by the same interviewer (Principal Investigator).

Interviews focused on specific themes and lasted approximately one hour each. The first round of interviews provided a narrative of the participants' digital footprint and social media usage and to assist with capturing this information, students were also asked to comment on their footprint as summarised by tools such as QuillConnect (<https://quillconnect.narrativescience.com/>) and Klout (<https://klout.com/>), as well as a Google search (<https://www.google.co.uk>). In the second round of interviews, participants were asked to draw their digital footprint and to reflect and describe their digital footprint to the interviewer. The reflective process enabled a deeper examination of a number of themes, including privacy, identity curation and online experiences. The third round of interviews focused on capturing recent social media activity and discussing community, identity, authenticity, and eprofessionalism. This final interview also directly focused on social media usage in learning and teaching contexts, including the participants' experiences and expectations.

The data gathered through both surveys and interviews provides a rich and complex representation of how students are curating their online presence and the experiences and challenges manifesting online. Our findings have also provided empirical evidence to support recommendations to key University support services, including the Careers Service and the Counselling Service. These research findings and recommendations enable these Services to have a greater awareness of the possible challenges that students are facing, and in turn, better equip them to support students.

### **Student Identities Online**

Understanding identity and our 'self' can enable us to shape our reality (Siegel 2005: 3), whilst Goffman's work on the 'presentation of self' (1969) conceptualised identity as multiple, including both 'on stage' and 'off stage' facets that shift with the audience and context at hand. In the 1990's, Turkle argued that we also inhabit "multiple identities" online (1994: 166) and since then, our understanding of online identity has become ever more complex and sophisticated (boyd 2014). For some, the creation and defining of identity may not be an individual pursuit, but may be created and manipulated by others. Barbour and Marshall define this as the "uncontrollable self" (2012), and boyd's research on 'networked teens' highlights that "self-representation is constructed through what they explicitly provide, through what their friends share, and as a product of how other people respond to them" (2014: 49). Our own Digital Footprint survey data illustrates examples where others have partial or substantial control over an

individual student's identity through, for instance, unwanted tagging in photographs, which 10.8% of our participants stated they had experienced.

Both the individualistic and communal creation of identity can be clearly evidenced when examining students' identities online. During our ethnographic interviews, it was evident that some students had given their online identity careful consideration, including thought over who might potentially influence their "uncontrollable self". For example, interview participant 5 stated "...my boundaries are more set about who I allow to be my friend...if you're my friend I'll trust that you don't put anything stupid [up]". While boundary setting may be an important aspect of identity creation and curation, boyd argues that visibility and the ease with which content can be shared can also result in conflict. Furthermore, boyd's argues, with reference to Goffman (1969), that many teens manipulate their online identities to suit perceived audiences and privacy judgements (2014). These decisions and acts of curation around sharing, privacy, and varying identities dependent on the audience, according to boyd, reflects teens' desire to take control over their identity and social situation. Whilst the subjects of our own research are slightly older than boyd's, similar dynamics are at play in a higher education context, in relation to control, perceived audience, boundaries and the technological affordances of the social media platforms, which can result in a challenging and potentially fraught arena in which students (and staff) need to confidently navigate.

In our research online/offline identity creation and presentation was considered carefully by interview participant 1, who stated that "Facebook, I would say it's probably just a kind of a representation of who I am in some ways, like who I am in my personal life" and in terms of friending and potentially engaging with others, participant 1 stated, "If I wouldn't sit down and have a coffee with them, why are they my friend on this? and in the same way as you would in real life, eventually kind of cutting ties with that person". For this interviewee, there were clear boundaries, norms and behaviours of online/offline identities; as they perceived them as one and the same. Our interview findings generally highlighted that our participants are carefully considering their digital identity and how they can potentially manage it, but there were certain areas that lacked clarity such as the issue of professional versus the personal identity.

In the context of transitions, it is also interesting to note how online protocols and boundaries appear to develop with age or, more notably, depending on which transitional period the student is in. Boyd's (2014) research on the social lives of networked teens and how they engage with social media provides an insight into how some students transitioning into university may engage with social media. This aligns with our findings as to how students are perceiving and using social media. From our work we observe

that on transitioning into university, there may be discomfort and a tendency to maintain links with the life/friends that the student has moved from. Their new identity, as a student, may challenge some of their previous online behaviours and the expectations of others. For example, previously, they may have worried less about privacy settings or friended more people more readily, however, on establishing themselves at university, especially for those in professional disciplines, such as medicine, their approach to their online identity may shift. In our research, interview participant 5 provides concise reflection on this transitional process: "I think I'm a private person...I take a lot of care and time over my close friends...I'm not of the age where it's like ooh I've got 250 friends on Facebook...It's like I don't really care about that kind of stuff".

The transition out of the university may also raise some challenges in relation to student identity, as many students stated that they are unclear as to whether employers would judge them on their social media presences. For others, especially those in the field of medicine, education or law, they understood the importance of a professional online presence but were unsure if this extended to their time as a student and how they should manage their professional and personal identity online. This potential blurring of professional and personal presences is also a challenge faced by mature and post graduate students who may need to balance their student experience and transitions alongside their own employment or former professional role.

## **Transitions**

The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA), define "Student Transitions", in the context of their Enhancement Theme work in this area (2014b, Annex 5: Institutional Context: 21), as:

*"Student Transitions is an ambitious Enhancement Theme which will focus on the student experience of a number of targeted transitions. It will encapsulate some topics already identified, Curriculum for Excellence and employability for example, and will have student engagement at its centre. The Theme will support HEIs' ongoing work in addressing the drive to build a flexible and responsive higher education experience which is accessible to all through managed transitions and articulations between schools, FE, HE and employment."*

Increased attention has been given to transitions (at all stages) in higher education, and a number of areas have been addressed, including identity formation and communities of practice (Tobbell et al., 2010; O'Shea 2014); student experience (Hallett, 2010); and professionalism online or 'eprofessionalism' (Chester et al, 2013; Fenwick 2016). Transitions play a particularly important role in supporting the student experience of university, and supporting them in developing the 'soft skills' for employment and

future prospects, aspects which are ever more important to students and universities working within a more market-driven higher education context, where the long term value is under greater scrutiny.

Drawing on recent scholarship as well as our own findings from the digital footprint research, we will focus on the relationship between social media and the three stages of the student journey. The first stage is the student's transition from school, employment or other study/education into university; the second stage is their time and development whilst at the university; and the third stage is their transitioning out into further study/research, employment, or other avenues. Understanding how a student curates and manages their online identity at the different stages can provide an insight into how universities may support students (and staff) at stages which can often be challenging to negotiate and which may result in "transition shock" (Nelson et al. 2006: 3).

Transitions into and out of higher education can be complex, bringing with them a diversity of experiences and identities. This context, coupled with students' awareness (or lack of) of the potential benefits and challenges of social media and online identity, is an area which HEIs are beginning to address through Careers Services (employability), Information Services (digital skills) and in relation to specific discipline requirements around students who are considered para-professionals when entering into the university, into disciplines such as medicine, teaching, law and social care (eprofessionalism).

The discourse on transitions is not only a practical challenge for HEIs, it is also a useful lens when considering the potential for embedding social media in the curriculum, as well as opportunities to support students in curating an effective online presence.

### **Students and social media experience**

Our Digital Footprint research data enabled a greater understanding of social media use, behaviours and experiences in our own organisational context, in order to inform our own local support and teaching practices.

We asked participants whether they had 'ever experienced any of the following online', and we listed a number of potential experiences, both positive and negative (Question 12). Significantly, the most common experiences were positive, such as 'an approach for a job or volunteering opportunity' (11.1% in survey one, 9.8% in survey two) and 'received help or support from a peer' (15.7%). However the experience of having 'seen someone share something you didn't think was appropriate' (17.8%) was the most popular response across both surveys. Since both positive and negative experiences ranked highly in the survey, we explored these areas in more depth with our interviewees. A topic which frequently

emerged was that of privacy and the ways in which students implement a range of sophisticated methods in order to effectively manage their privacy (Brake 2014; boyd 2014). For example, some interviewees noted that they carefully manipulated Facebook privacy settings so as not to upset family and this aligned with our survey findings, where 9.5% (n=586) of respondents stated that they had deleted a post to avoid upsetting others. A recent Pew report has also found that 41% of respondents to their survey had deleted/edited something which had been posted in the past and that “86% of internet users have tried to use the internet in ways to minimize the visibility of their digital footprints” (Rainie et al., 2013). Brake argues that it is difficult to know the level of harm caused by such acts by others (2014: 27), although increasingly the risks of a public error in judgement or compromised online identity are part of mainstream news reporting and public discourse (e.g. Ronson 2015) which may be directly influencing curation tactics.

Our survey findings indicate that students have an awareness of their online identity, consequences of poor or mismanagement, as well as the role others may play in defining their digital footprint (Barbour and Marshall 2012). Nonetheless, there are also areas where students lacked awareness of how beneficial their online presence could be, or how they might improve it. For instance, 44% of participants stated that they had never created a LinkedIn account (Question 8.5) and yet nearly 28% of participants wanted advice about professional networking, with nearly 26% keen for information/events related to digital footprints and employment opportunities (Question 23). Speculatively, this data indicates that the participants (and possibly the wider student cohort) may not appreciate that professional networking sites, such as LinkedIn, could enable them to manage their professional online presence. These particular findings have been explored with the University of Edinburgh’s Careers Service, which already regularly runs LinkedIn workshops on-campus and, as a result of the findings, these sessions have now been rebranded to make that connection more explicit, with new online sessions also launched alongside greater promotion of the workshops via different social media platforms.

### **Social Media in Learning and Teaching**

Many academics are unaware of the benefits or may be sceptical of using social media in learning and teaching environments (Jacquemin et al. 2014), however, as we have highlighted above, it is not without challenges. Significantly, when considering students in a number of different transitional phases, which Tobbell et al. define as “shifts in practice” and which coincide with their identity and communication formations (2010: 266). If we consider these factors in relation to embedding social media in learning and teaching environments, we need to consider the challenges of using non-traditional platforms (Jacquemin et al. 2014) and the ephemeral nature of such spaces, especially when used in assessment scenarios.

We also need to recognise that not all students welcome universities encroaching on spaces which they perceive as personal or private places, such as Facebook. There may be a variety of reasons why students do not want to engage with social media in the classroom, including availability or possible surveillance issues (Bamman 2012). Consequently, students may feel isolated or forced to expand/create a digital footprint, when they do not wish to, therefore educators need to consider their choice of technologies, pedagogic approaches and alternative opportunities to ensure an inclusive curriculum design.

### **Implications for higher education**

Through our research we have identified implications for higher education institutions that fall into five key areas, namely duty of care; risk management; digital skills training/support; availability/choice of platform; and accessibility/usability.

In terms of **duty of care**, this focuses on raising awareness and ensuring students are making an 'informed choice', when using social media especially when transitioning into or out of the university. We have defined 'informed choice' as 'the opportunity for an individual to make a choice based on a clear understanding of the possible implications as a result of actions, behaviours or attitudes'. This is further developed in the 'eprofessionalism' context and drawing from Chester et al. (2013), we have defined 'eprofessionalism' as 'the way you engage yourself online in relation to your profession, including your attitudes, actions, and your adherence to relevant professional codes of conduct'.

Both informed choice and eprofessionalism emerged as strong themes for HEIs to engage with, whether via resources or in the curriculum itself. This is particularly the case in disciplines where students may be deemed 'para-professionals' from the commencement of their studies and are therefore expected to abide by the social media and professional conduct guidelines set out by the relevant professional bodies. For example, nursing students in the UK need to comply with the social media guidance set out by the Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC) (2015).

Evidence from our second survey suggested that many participants were not aware of social media guidance in their handbooks, despite the research team's awareness that many courses/programmes do provide this guidance. Therefore the objectives of our Digital Footprint project included raising the profile of existing guidelines, including professional bodies' guidance, as well as developing social media guidelines (CC-BY) for use by those programmes not already providing their own. These guidelines were adapted from existing resources produced with the School of Biological Sciences, and have been made available for use and adaptation by other Schools/Programmes in student handbooks or virtual learning environments (VLEs). To assist with promoting good social media practice, the adapted guidelines have

been widely promoted and are accessible to all, contributing to the University's wider open education resources' agenda (<http://open.ed.ac.uk/>).

The guidelines also address, in part, the issue of **risk management** which includes raising awareness of current practices, terms and conditions of platforms, and issues such as data management, privacy, data ownership, copyright, and intellectual property rights (IPR). It is important that staff as well as students are aware of these different areas and that their own practice – particularly in embedding social media and new technologies into the curriculum – reflects a thorough understanding of risk. An area particularly highlighted by Chester et al., relates to 'safe places', those spaces where students can confidentially and safely discuss issues e.g. patient/client information, without being subjected to misconduct allegations (2013: 37). This also directly relates with the need to support students in relation to professional practice (eprofessionalism).

The third implication aligns with the overall aim of the 'digital footprint' project and that is providing **digital skills training/support** to students (and staff). This has been implemented at the University of Edinburgh through a series of practical workshops and guidance on using social media and effectively managing an online presence. Some of these have been embedded into the curriculum, such as 'Brand You' sessions at the Business School, or the exploration of digital tracks and traces as part of the MSc Digital Education. Equipping both staff and students with digital skills is crucial if there is to be an element of confidence when engaging with social media. Furthermore, much can be gained from others working in this area, such as the Jisc Digital Student initiative (<http://digitalstudent.jiscinvolve.org/>).

A grounding of excellent skills also supports **ability/choice of platform**, which relates to enabling alternative choices, and considering the appropriateness of particular online tools within wider political, cultural and economic contexts, particularly as our students are diverse in their backgrounds. This is important for understanding students' digital footprints and online engagement as well as informing the ways in which HEIs may best support students, especially where social media platforms are used as communication mediums or as tools within learning and teaching contexts (Jacquemin et al. 2014; Ferdig 2008).

The final area relates to **accessibility/usability** of platforms and directly pertains to the ways in which social media platforms are to be embedded in learning and teaching contexts. Accessibility is an issue of importance for students with disabilities but it also has a wider meaning. In particular the choice of particular platforms may have implications for those in an international context (i.e. distance learners), students from some home nations where social media use is highly scrutinized or regulated, but may also

include any student's use of a site where terms and conditions may negatively impact on an individual's digital footprint by enforcing a public presence (Bamman 2015).

These implications are in no way limiting factors for implementing social media in a learning and teaching context. Rather, they are areas which require careful consideration to ensure that they do not negatively impact on the reputation of individuals, organisations or the curriculum.

## **Conclusions**

The Digital Footprint research presented here shows that we, as educators and support staff within Higher Education, should not make assumptions about what students are doing with social media. The realities of student social media use are complex and, most challengingly, highly varied (boyd 2014, Barbour and Marshall 2012). If we are to truly understand a students' approach to learning, we also need to understand their wider experiences (Tobbell et al. 2010: 265). Stage of study, age and maturity, and cultural background all play a role in differentiating individual experience, as does specific previous personal experience and the expectations associated with future career goals.

As educators we need to be confident that we can support students and staff with digital skills and the use of social media, and to do so in a way that supports and enables their transition into and out of university. We need to support students to understand how they can create an effective online presence – one that presents them as they would wish to be seen, whether such a presence is elaborate and expansive or very private and carefully controlled.

In considering the use of social media in teaching and learning contexts we have to be aware of the risks and benefits. In addition to supporting students to understand the implications of their own actions we also have to be mindful of the impact of digital tracks and traces that may arise from pedagogical use of these tools if we are to consider embedding them in our own course activities.

Social media tools and behaviours also changes frequently, requiring support and guidance for students to be sufficiently flexible, developing and adapting over time. Supporting students to manage their own digital footprint is an ongoing process, responding to changing requirements and expectations of emerging trends and changing cohorts.

As a result of the Digital Footprint campaign and research work to date, here at the University of Edinburgh, we are addressing these changing needs of staff, students and researchers through an internal Digital Footprint service led by staff in the Institute for Academic Development. We are keen that this

research continues to develop and evolve alongside and so, in addition to further forthcoming publications and resources, we are also keen to work with other organisations through a new digital footprint consultancy service being piloted by EDINA.

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