

What's next, as Facebook use in UK universities continues to grow?

by Blog Admin

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*How widely is Facebook used within higher education? And does 'liking' a university's Facebook page really signify engagement between the student and the institution? **Brian Kelly** looks at whether the social networking service should be viewed as a digital mailing list, or if it has a role to play as a platform for the development of new services.*



Facebook Usage for Russell Group Universities

In order to gather evidence to support discussions on the relevance of use of Facebook in the higher education sector a survey of Facebook usage, determined by links for institutional pages, has been carried out for the 20 Russell Group universities. This survey follows on from previous surveys carried in in January and September 2011 which will enable trends to be detected. Note that the full data from the following table is [available as a Google Spreadsheet](#).

Note: The data for the surveys was collected on [11 January 2011](#), [25 September 2011](#) (estimate) and 16 May 2012.

In brief, in a period of eight months we have seen an increase in the number of 'likes' for the twenty UK Russell Group Universities of over 432,300 users with the largest increase, of almost 248,000 occurring at the University of Oxford. The largest percentage increase in that time has taken place at University of Glasgow, which has seen a growth of 1,346 per cent from 1,860 to 27,149 and UCL which has seen a growth of 679 per cent from 4,346 to 33,493.

The overall trends are illustrated in the accompanying histogram. As can be seen this shows a significant growth in the overall number of Facebook likes across the Russell Group universities.

It should also be noted that [according to Russell Group University Web site](#) "half a million students are enrolled at Russell Group universities – one in five of all higher education students in the UK". Although the numbers of Facebook likes will include members of staff and other interested parties, the data does seem to suggest that a significant proportion of students are using Facebook.

Discussion

I suspect that social media consultants who advise the higher education sector will find the evidence presented in this post useful in demonstrating the importance of Facebook. However some caveats need to be pointed out:

- There may be significant growth when six formers are deciding which universities to apply to. The 'liking' of a university may provide a bookmark which is not an indication of engagement with the institution.
- New students may like their new institution's Facebook page when they arrive, but may not use the service during their time at the institution.
- Students may not unlike their institution's Facebook page when they graduate, meaning that the number of Facebook likes will include people who have left the institution and may no longer use the service or have an interest in the information provided.

In addition to the need to the interpretation of the data there will also be a need to make policy decisions

which should be informed by such evidence, but may not need to be determined by the evidence. It may be that Facebook can be regarded in a similar way to mailing lists: people use them and gain some value from them but development work is likely to take place using other technologies. Alternatively the popularity of Facebook may mean that that it has a role to play as a platform for development of new services. As described in a post on [Facebook and Twitter as Infrastructure for Dissemination of Research Papers \(and More\)](#) publishers such as Springer are providing mechanisms for researchers to share peer-reviewed papers using Facebook and Twitter, so perhaps Facebook could have a role to play as a sharing tool which is embedded within institutional tools.

Alternatively might Facebook have a role to play in more significant development work. The initial popularity of the Guardian's Facebook app suggested that Facebook could have a role to play in sharing one's reading activities across one's networks, although more recent evidence, as described in a post on "[Facebook Social Readers Are All Collapsing](#)" suggests that Facebook apps which provide 'frictionless sharing' are declining in popularity. A more recent post TechCrunch post which described how [Decline Of Reader Apps Likely Due To News Feed Changes, Shows Facebook Controls The Traffic Faucet](#) provided a more thoughtful analysis of the reasons for the decline in usage, but also highlighted the dependencies which organisations will have in reliance on commercial companies whose business decisions may adversely affect organisations which rely on their services.

*Figure 2: Facebook 'Likes' for Russell Group universities
(see google document for full list of institution names)*

The question "What's next for Facebook use in UK Universities?" will be an interesting one. And with over half a million 'likes' will Oxford University be thinking about benefits which can be gained from such a large network? Alternatively will institutions such as Newcastle University with small Facebook networks shrug their metaphorical shoulders at such suggestions and argue that Facebook has no value to their teaching and learning and research activities? Or might the popularity of Facebook at Oxford and Cambridge Universities, which, as can be seen from the histogram, has a significant affect on the overall totals for Russell Group universities, simply reflect the brand awareness for these two institutions?

What are your thoughts? And what evidence will you need to gather if you feel that alternatives to Facebook will have a significant role to play?

This post was originally published on Brian Kelly's blog, [UK Web Focus](#). He has asked readers to consider participating in a survey on the use of Facebook across higher education [here](#).

Note: This article gives the views of the author(s), and not the position of the Impact of Social Sciences blog, nor of the London School of Economics

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Brian Kelly works for the JISC-funded Innovation Support Centre at UKOLN, University of Bath. His job title is UK Web Focus. In this role he has responsibility for supporting innovative uses of the Web and sharing best practices. Brian's [UK Web Focus](#) blog was launched in 1996 and has a high profile in sharing thoughts on Web developments. The blog is an open notebook, averaging about 4 posts per week (1,090+ posts in total). This is complemented by Brian's [@briankelly Twitter account](#) which provides a tool for engagement and dissemination.

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2. [Images of the 'ivory tower' do not portray the full story: it is more likely that UK universities generate billions of pounds in social value each year.](#)
3. [Who gives a tweet? After 24 hours and 860 downloads, we think quite a few actually do](#)
4. [By leveraging social media for impact, academics can create broader support for our intellectual work and profession.](#)
5. [Universities are increasingly moving towards recognising digital scholarship despite conflicting messages that favour traditional publishing in journals](#)