



Equity and Digital Footprint Project

Rachel Buchanan
Jill Scevak
Shamus Smith
Erica Southgate



THE UNIVERSITY OF
NEWCASTLE
AUSTRALIA



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Project description:

Digital footprint management is important for ensuring that all students succeed in career development. It is an emerging equity issue in higher education as students from higher SES (HSES) backgrounds come to university with more ICT skills and knowledge than students from lower SES (LSES) backgrounds. This project responds to concerns that universities are not adequately addressing the development of the digital skills needed for students in their career development.

This project aimed to build an evidence base for the development of resources and strategies to help undergraduate students manage and curate their digital footprints by:

1. Investigating the digital footprint knowledge and behaviour of undergraduate students from LSES and other non-traditional backgrounds (e.g. students from remote and rural locations, students with a disability, Indigenous students);
2. Investigating higher education institutions approaches to educating undergraduate students about managing and curating digital footprints for successful personal and professional outcomes;
3. Identifying examples of evidence-informed practice for education of undergraduate students regarding their digital footprints; and
4. Devising a multipronged, multi audience communication and dissemination strategy.

Conceptual and/or methodological framework:

This project employed a mixed methods research design. Firstly, undergraduate students from a variety of backgrounds from 28 Australian universities participated in an online survey (n=635) that explored their knowledge and behaviour in relation to digital footprint management and curation. Secondly, 30 students from UON participated in focus groups conducted to determine preferences for content and mode of delivery of resources for managing and curating digital footprints. In addition to this, the following data collection strategies were employed:

1. An online survey of Career Services within Australian universities (n=45) to map approaches to educating and engaging students – particularly from LSES backgrounds - about digital footprints;
2. A desktop audit of online resources on digital footprint from 45 universities to determine suitability for higher education contexts; and

3. A Delphi survey of experts in the field (n=53) to draw on collective wisdom and evidence regarding the most effective educational approaches for LSES/ non-traditional students.

Key findings:

- There is a difference between how high and low SES students develop their digital footprints, with low SES more likely to develop digital footprints that carry potentially negative outcomes;
- Students are using a variety of strategies to manage their digital footprints, but few are developing a positive digital footprint for professional purposes;
- Over 75% (n=425) of the participants claimed that their university has provided them with no guidance on how to manage their digital footprints;
- Less than half (n=9) of the 45 universities audited provide accessible information on digital footprint management;
- Respondents in the Delphi survey all agreed that there are equity/social justice issues around digital footprint management as LSES students are more likely to have never been given any guidance on the development of positive digital footprints.

Implications for the future:

There is a need for universities to provide guidance to students on the management of their digital footprints. The Delphi experts suggest that a holistic approach be taken, with government, universities, teachers, parents and carers and students all needing to be involved and to be responsible.