**Adopting Social Media for Stakeholder Engagement: a case of UK HEI**

**Abstract**

Since 2015 the School of Business, Economics and Leadership at Staffordshire University (Business School) has used social media to engage with internal and external stakeholders. As platform use grew, external facing accounts featured in Edurank, which measures and reports rankings for Business School social media activity globally. Over a period of 6 months from August 2016 to February 2017, the School was placed within the top 5 Business Schools worldwide for social media activity.

Success in achieving the high rankings developed from an initiative to increase engagement with external stakeholders, demonstrating to students how social media can be used effectively for business engagement; a key employability tool. A case history for use of social media in academia, the paper draws upon analytics from both internal social media accounts and Edurank.

The strategy focused on creation of best practice, using the AIDA model overlaid with the 5S’s to structure activity and required academics to engage with social media; a challenge, as literature confirms that academics are laggards in the adoption of social media.

Edurank rankings and platform analytics evidence the success of the initiative, demonstrating how strategic planning of activity can enable organisations to communicate and engage with external stakeholders.

**Introduction**

Social media has become an important communication channel for organisations in all sectors including higher education, not only to engage with stakeholders, both internally and externally, but more critically to develop, maintain and enhance relationship with these stakeholders. In context to this, Hua Jiang et al. (2017) found that business organisations use social media predominantly for stakeholder engagement in order to share information, marketing activities and relationship development. Engagement can be defined in many ways. According to Dijkmans, Kerkhof and Beukeboom (2015), cognition, emotion and behaviours all contribute to engagement. In the HE context, cognition (e.g. being interested in the institution’s activities), emotions (feeling positive about the institution’s activities) and behaviours (participation in the institution’s activities). Baldus et al. (2015) define engagement as the compelling, intrinsic motivations to continue interacting with an online brand community. In this respect, the continued and growing likes, shares and comments on social media post could be seen to constitute cognitive and emotive engagement.

From an internal stakeholder perspective, the application of social media channels is also becoming highly popular for enhancing student experience in the higher education sector (Tess, 2013). The primary use of social media in higher education relates to enhancement of student skillset development by facilitating their study programmes through use of integrated learning platforms for co-creation and dissemination of knowledge directly linking to employability and graduate skills (Sutherland and Ho, 2017). However, there is a dearth of research specifically focusing on the impact of social media in stakeholder engagement from the perspective of graduate skills development in context of higher education institutions. It is known that businesses and prospective employer organisations are increasingly seeing social media as a cost effective communication tool (Swani et al. 2016, Perrigot et al. 2012, Kietzmann et al. 2011, Durkin et al. 2013, Oztamur & Karakadilar 2014), so the ability to effectively plan and conduct a social media communications campaign benefits graduates seeking employment in a crowded graduate market. Indeed this is seen to be a key employability tool for Business Management students. Therefore, the objective of this study is to demonstrate to students (internal stakeholders) how planned social media can be used effectively to engage with external business stakeholders, thus enhancing their understanding of effective use of social media as an employability skill.

**Background**

Since its emergence in the final years of the 20th Century, social media usage has grown exponentially. According to UKOM’s UK Digital Market Overview (June 2017), there were 40 million unique visitors to Social Media in the UK in June 2017. Social media is embedded into business communication strategies, in recognition of the fact that stakeholder audiences are increasingly engaging with multiple platforms. Daugherty and Hoffmann (2014) suggest that consumers are now able to connect, create, produce and share content like never before. For millennials entering higher education, social media is an accepted form of communication, having been prevalent throughout their entire lifetime. Hence, business school students benefit from direct experience of social media usage in the context of encouraging engagement with Staffordshire Business School’s own stakeholder audiences.

In relation to this, recent literature also confirms that many academics are still laggards in the adoption of social media communications (Ajjan & Hartshorne 2008, Manca & Ranieri 2016, Akcayir 2017, Cao et al., 2013). Often this appears to generate from a fear of exposure to students on social media, concerns over privacy, a lack of time to engage and poor technology competency. Efforts to drive social media activity therefore increasingly fall upon a small number of social media active academics and a structured approach is required to ensure meaningful engagement with external stakeholders. This seems to be familiar scenario across most HEIs (Higher Education Institutions) in the UK.

**Methodology**

Since late 2013 academics within the Business School at Staffordshire University have periodically made use of social media accounts to engage with both internal and external stakeholders. Closed Facebook Groups were used as platforms to engage with students, who identified them as excellent forums for sharing course information, organising events, asking questions, networking and identifying work placement and career opportunities that were posted on the page by academics.

In August 2015, a twitter account was set up for the Business School, @BusinessStaffs. The twitter handle currently has 1700 followers. Whilst the Facebook groups were growing both in membership and activity, it was recognised that these were internally facing and that there was potential to better use social media to promote the Business School externally. A Business School Facebook page was created in April 2016 (@staffsbusinessschool). The page presently has a relatively small 342 page likes and 352 followers, growing on average by between 2-5 additional likes/followers per week. A Business School Instagram account was created to complement the Facebook and Twitter accounts (@staffsbus). The Instagram account has 571 posts to date and 255 followers.

The AIDA (Awareness, Interest, Desire and Action) model (commonly attributed to Lewis, 1898) was introduced to business and marketing undergraduates at Level 4, as a framework to support the development of communications both offline and online. Its application supports social media activity to engage with external stakeholders of the business school, however it lacks specific focus on digital communications. Therefore, 5S framework developed by Smith (2000) was also linked to evaluate better structural understanding to digital communication and test key aspects of Sell, Speak, Save, Serve and Sizzle by using content analysis. By overlaying the AIDA model with the 5S’s, the effectiveness of social media communications can be assured.

**Findings and Analysis**

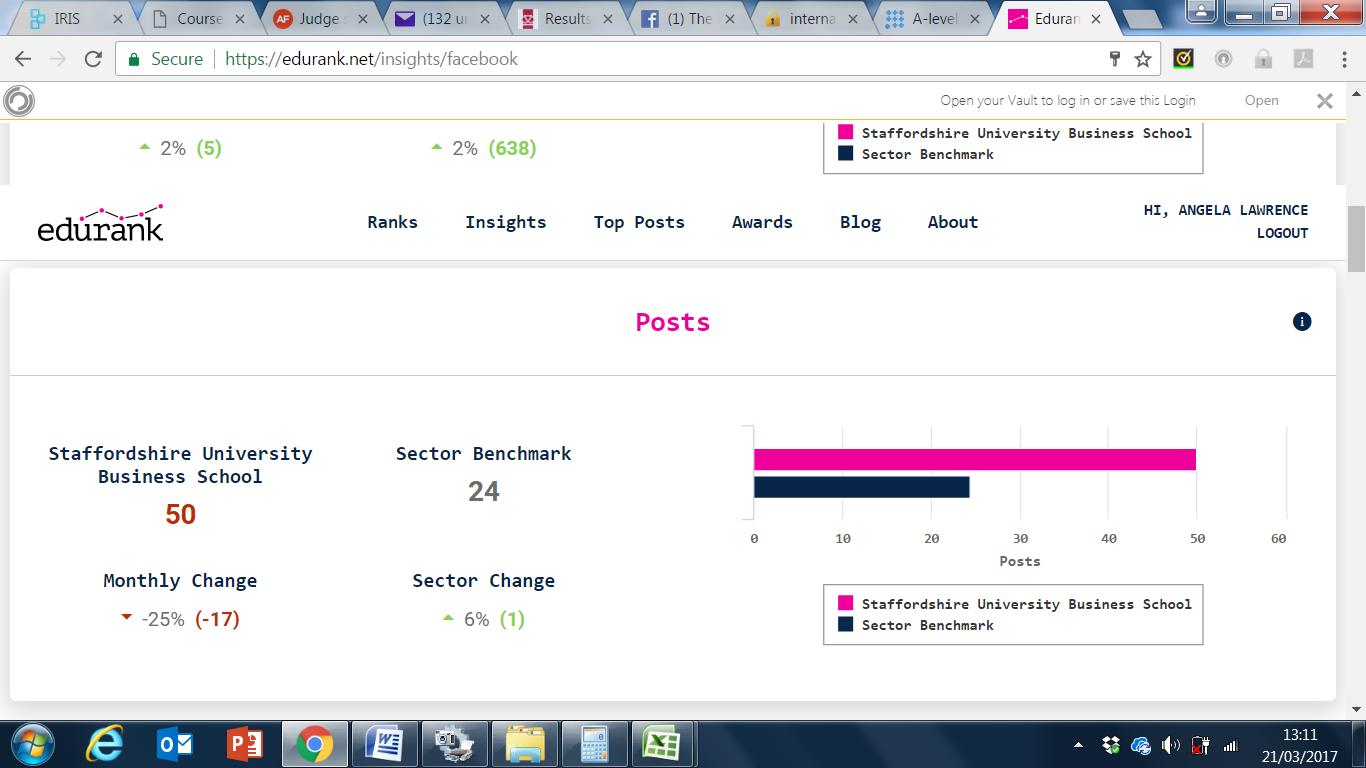
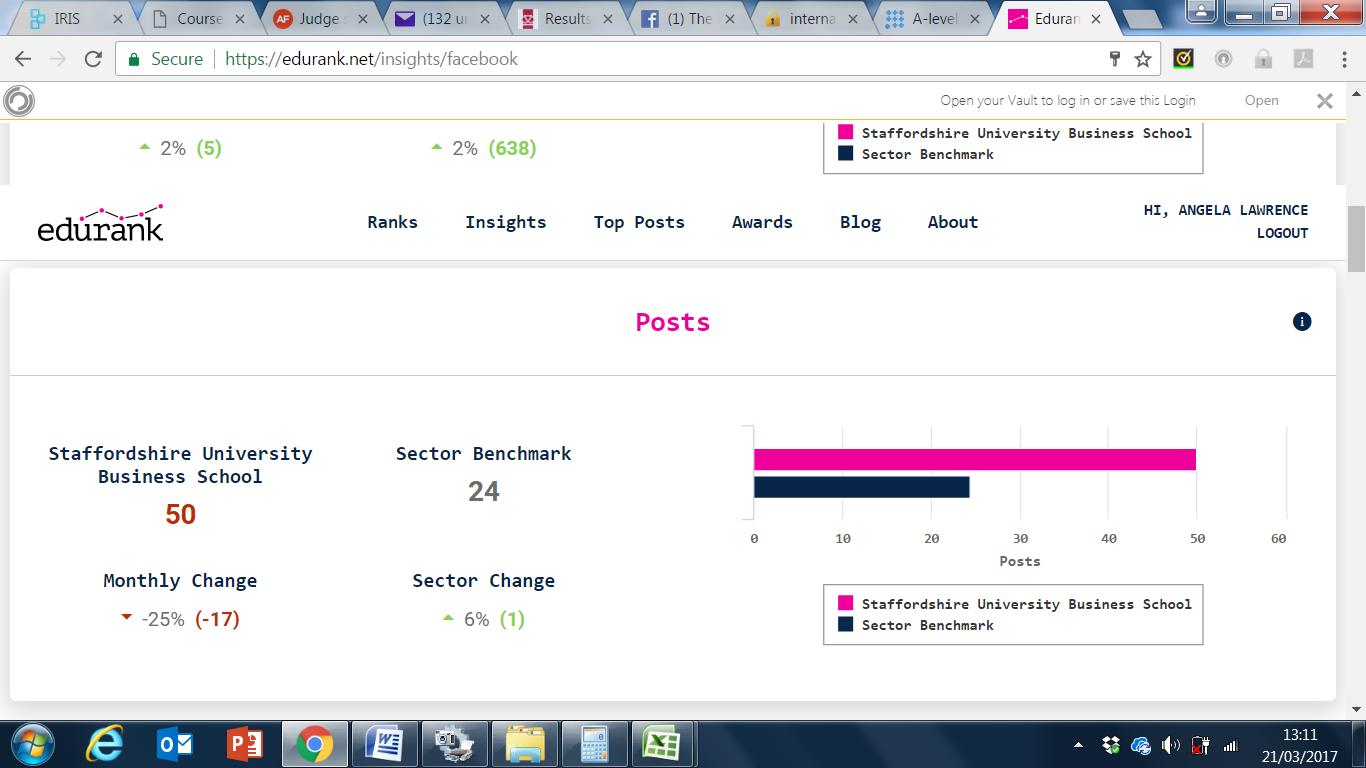
Application of the AIDA and 5S’s models to more effectively use social media for external engagement (Appendix 1), saw engagement begin to grow, leading to the Business School accounts beginning to feature in Edurank (www.edurank.net). In this context, engagement was seen to be positive congnition and emotion, as defined by Dijkmans, Kerkhof and Beukeboom (2015), expressed through reactions, comments and shares. There is no measurement of behaviours within the limits of this research. Edurank, run by digital education specialist agency Net Natives, specifically measures and reports rankings for Business School social media activity around the globe. During the 6 months monitored, Staffordshire Business School ranked in 1st place three times, placing it within the top 5 Business Schools across the world for its social media activity. The Business School Twitter account won an Edurank award for the Best Performing Business School Twitter account in 2016.

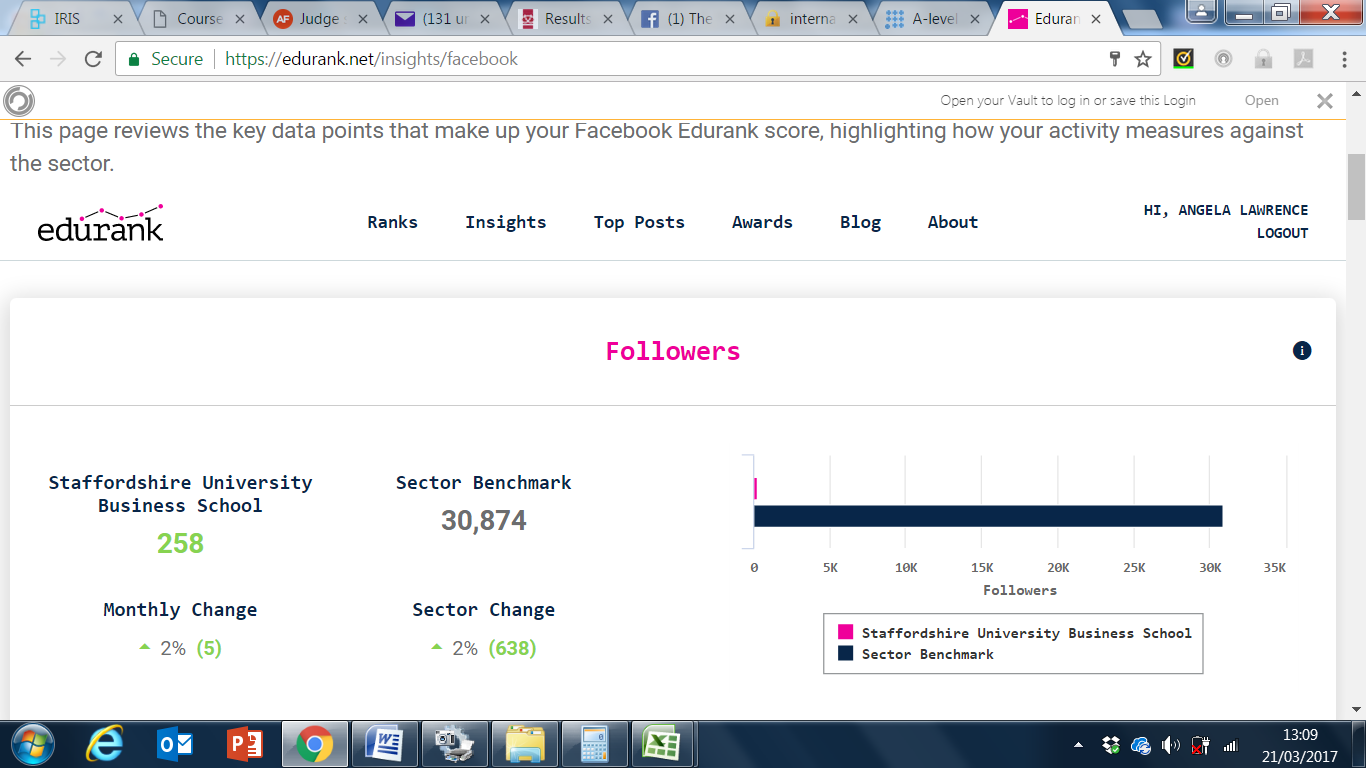
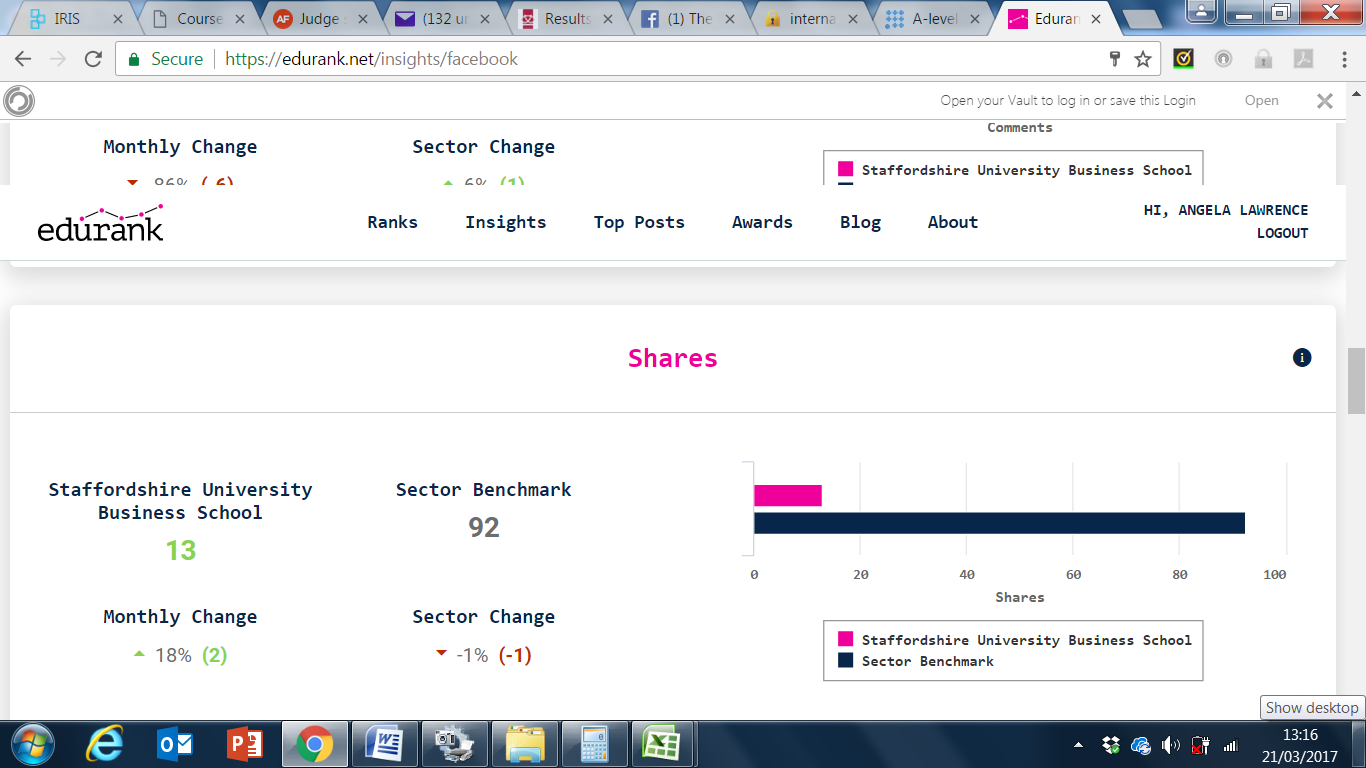
This was achieved despite followers being significantly lower than those of close competitors in the Edurank rankings, such as Harvard Business School (Table 1). Recognition of this fact led academics to explore and identify areas of best practice in their use of social media, with a view to replicating activity that had produced high levels of engagement with followers.

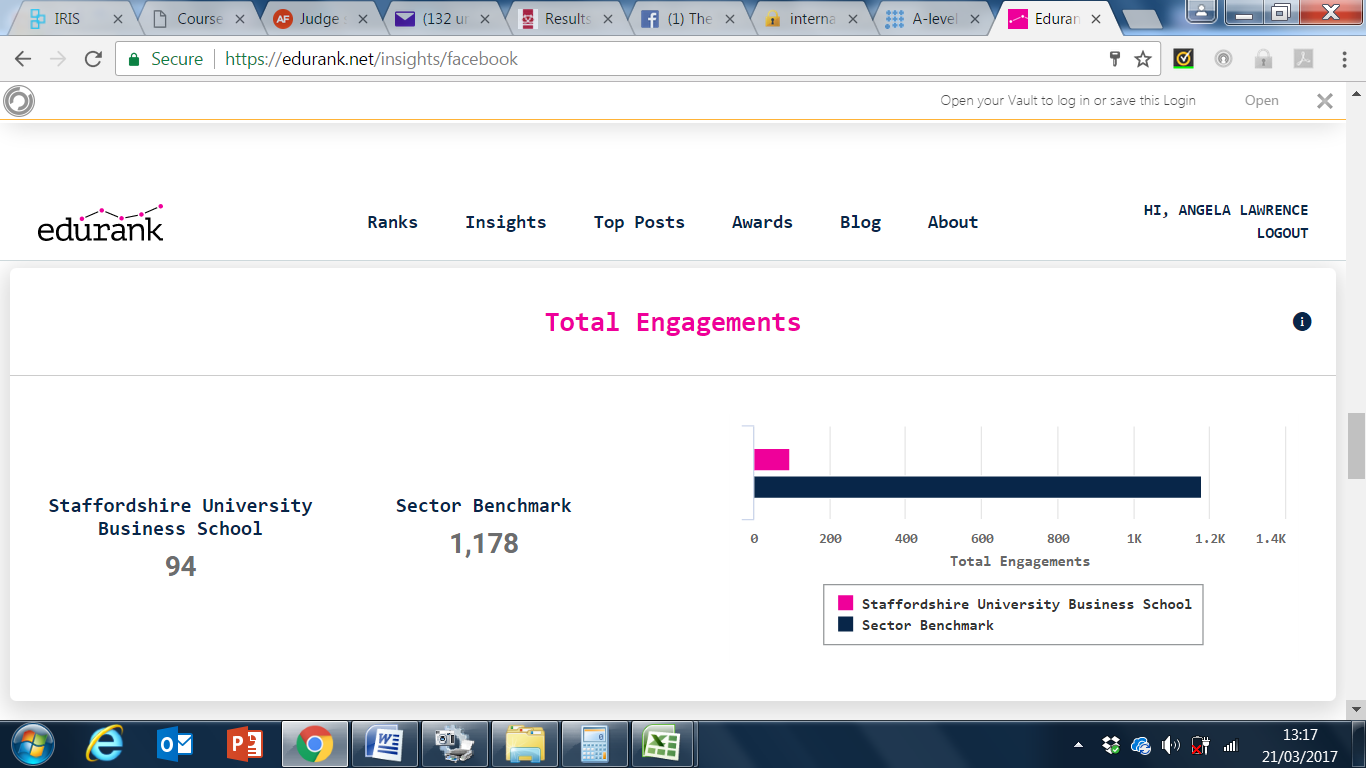
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Platform Followers** | **Harvard Business School** | **Stanford Graduate School of Business** | **Henley Business School** | **University of Edinburgh Business School** | **Staffordshire University Business School** | **Sector benchmark** | **Sector Leader** |
| **Facebook** | 473,343 | 259,726 | 7,419 | 15,509 | 262 | 30,874 | 473,343 |
| **Twitter** | 336,014 | 401,292 | 4,294 | 5,453 | 864 | 19,974 | 401,292 |
| **Instagram** | 80,037 | 35,286 | 1,406 | 1,192 | 136 | 1,993 | 80,037 |
| **YouTube** | 88,959 | 407,649 | 437 | 955 | - | 5,382 | 407,649 |
| **LinkedIn** | 314,914 | 128,625 | 31,354 | 7,529 | - | 24,475 | 314,914 |

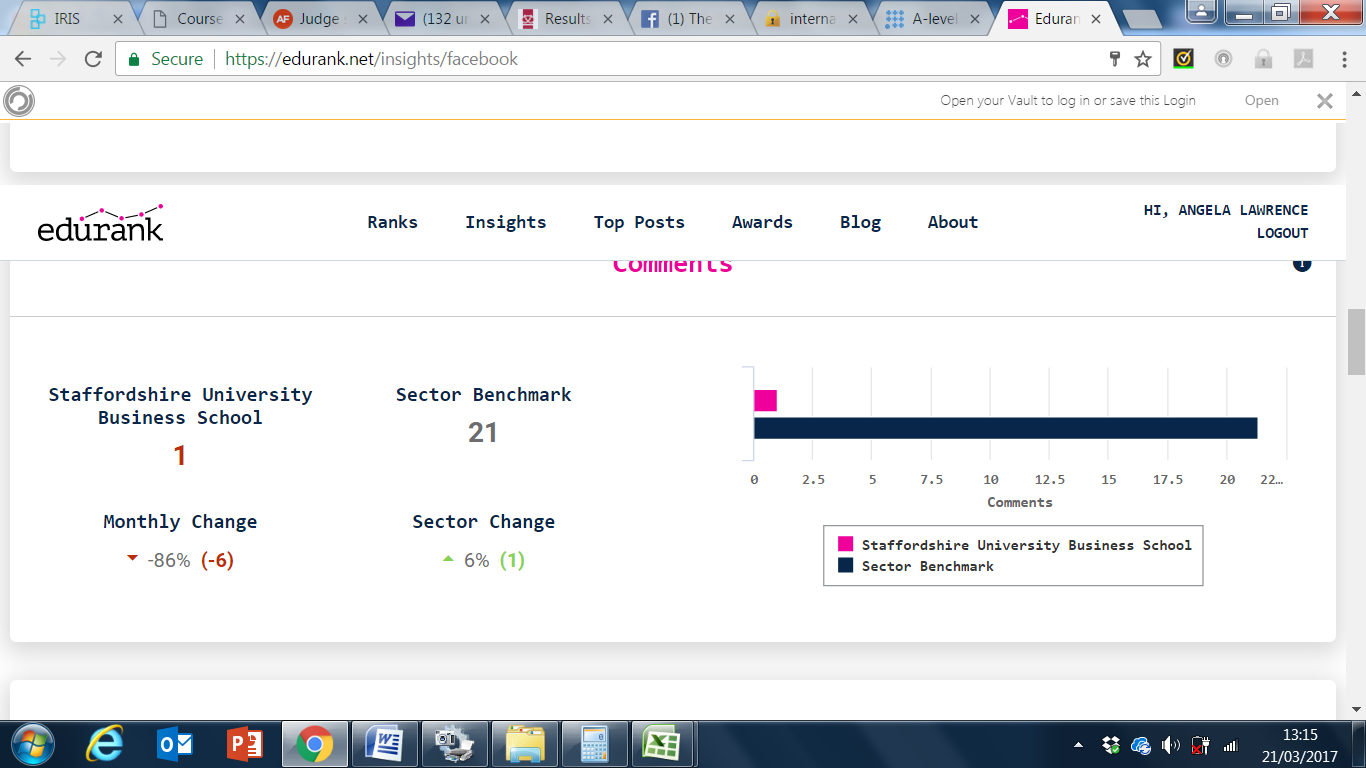
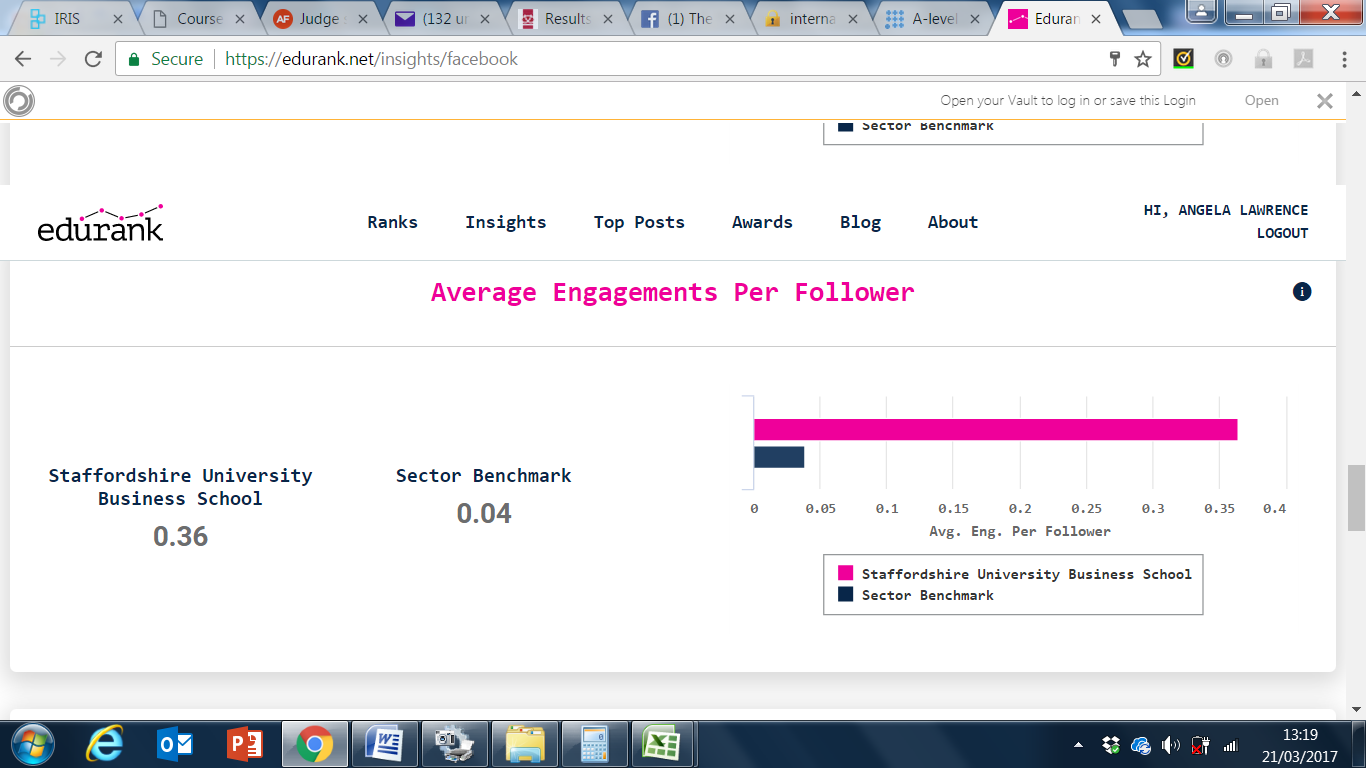
**Table 1. Platform Followers (*source, Edurank January 2017*)**

Further analysis of Edurank statistics revealed that whilst follower numbers were low compared to other featured accounts, engagement was extremely high, particularly the average engagement per follower. Analysis showed this to be due to a higher number of posts than the sector average and a higher average engagement per follower (Table 2).

**Table 2. Facebook activity against sector benchmarks (*source, Edurank February 2017)***

Analysis of platform metrics revealed that as expected, photographs and videos of staff and students achieved high levels of reach and engagement, along with external links to relevant articles and staff blogs (Table 3)





**Table 3: Facebook post engagement *(source, Facebook Insights)***

**Discussion**

Encouraging academics to take pictures is challenging, as this can be seen to be outside of their role, leading to complaints that they do not have time to engage with this activity. To counter this, enthusiastic students were drawn in to assist for specific events and given login details of the Business School social media accounts.

The social media strategy adopted by the Business School focused on the creation of best practice – recording of lectures, streaming Facebook live and periscope, social media competitions, polls, announcements of guest speakers, identification of relevant media activity to share. However, creation of content alone is not sufficient to ensure effective social media communications. Adoption of the AIDA and 5S’s model provided the planning framework required for social media activity within the business school.

Despite the creation of a social media planning framework, activity still often relied upon the goodwill and enthusiasm of a small number of staff who were socially active online. Consequently, dips in activity were evident when these staff were on annual leave or away on university business e.g. December 2016 (Table 4). This highlights the need for a more structured approach to social media activity, along with efficient use of the scheduling tools within the platforms themselves.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Engagement rate (%)** | **Link Clicks** | **Retweets** | **Average retweets per day** | **Likes** | **Average Likes per day** | **Replies** |
| Nov-16 | 1.5 | 248 | 543 | 18 | 622 | 21 | 39 |
| Dec-16 | 1 | 67 | 97 | 3 | 111 | 4 | 9 |
| Jan-17 | 1.3 | 157 | 146 | 5 | 140 | 5 | 29 |
| Feb-17 | 1.9 | 391 | 309 | 11 | 383 | 14 | 54 |

**Table 4:** Twitter activity (*source, Twitter analytics*)

The statistics demonstrate a growth in Edurank score (Table 5), showing how the score grew as strategic activity increased during the measured 6 months of sustained activity (August 2016 to January 2017). During the 3 months in which the Business School enjoyed 1st place ranking, both Facebook and Twitter had individual scores of 100. It can be seen how the overall score began to increase in September as Instagram emerged as a new platform.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Month | Rank (change) | Facebook | Twitter | Instagram | Score\* |
| Apr 16 | 155 (-1) | 2 | 3 | 0 | 1 |
| May 16 | 128 (+27) | 33 | 9 | 0 | 9 |
| June 16 | 152 (-24) | 16 | 4 | 0 | 4 |
| July 16 | 25 (+127) | 59 | 64 | 0 | 23 |
| Aug 16 | 3 (+22) | 97 | 100 | 0 | 44 |
| Sept 16 | 1 (+2) | 100 | 100 | 91 | 65 |
| Oct 16 | 1 (0) | 100 | 100 | 75 | 60 |
| Nov 16 | 1 (0) | 100 | 100 | 100 | 64 |
| Dec 16 | 16 (-15) | 32 | 100 | 18 | 35 |
| Jan 17 | 3 (+13) | 72 | 86 | 64 | 49 |

*\*The overall Edurank score which determines the rank is calculated from a combination of audience growth, posting activity and engagements (comments, likes, shares and video views/fans) for each profile’s social media platform (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, LinkedIn). Edurank takes this data directly from the source - the Business School’s profile pages on the respective platforms.*

**Table 5:** Business School Edurank score and rank (*source* [*www.edurank.net*](http://www.edurank.net))

A social media team (SoMeT), comprising faculty staff and members of the university marketing team was created. This enabled awareness of cross-faculty and other university activities that may be of interest to Business School social media audiences, whilst actual activity was undertaken at a School level by Course Leaders and other academics. The development of a strategic timeline of activity, use of social media management tools and publishing tools and application of AIDA and the 5S’s reduced the requirement to interrupt core academic activity with social media activity.

The Business School platforms have high numbers of posts compared to the sector benchmark and a high level of engagement per follower, (previously shown in Table 2). Thus, continued regularity of posting and consistent growth in followers was a target to ensure high ranking. Regular monitoring of platform analytics to identify posts performing well in terms of comments, engagement, shares/retweets and likes, fed into the SoMeT planning process.

**Conclusion and Implications**

The study reinforces the need for planned and sustained social media activity to engage with external stakeholders. It further demonstrates how application of AIDA and the 5S’s model can support a successful external stakeholder engagement strategy. The requirement for academics to further embrace social media is emphasised, as are the practical implications of social media usage within HE, in terms of academic time and technical competency.

Use of the initiative as a case study strengthens student understanding of strategic planning of digital marketing activity, use of publishing tools and interpretation of analytics to develop successful social media campaigns, thereby increasing their digital literacy. Importantly, the social media activity further exposes students to contemporary business issues outside of the core curriculum. Furthermore, the findings of this study can be used as a learning tool within the classroom, demonstrating to students how to plan and conduct an effective social media campaign.

**Limitations**

There is no evidence of subsequent stakeholder engagement behaviours e.g. course application. Whilst the impact to the Business School of this engagement is not measured in such tangible terms, it could be noted that as social media activity has increased, applications have increased. However, further research would be required to evidence attribution of increasing course applications or stronger employer links to social media engagement.

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Awareness** | **Interest** | **Desire** | **Action** |
| **SELL**  **SPEAK**  **SPEAK**  **SAVE**  **SIZZLE**  **SERVE**  **SERVE** | **Range of courses**  **School/College events**  **Open Days**  **Student activities** – In-class and extra-curricular activities  **Student success**  **Research-informed teaching**  **Links to external business content** | Links to web pages with course information and application links  Pictures/video of school/college students enjoying a taste of HE  Links to register for Open Days, pictures/video of Open Days, campus facilities, location benefits (accessibility), friendliness of staff  Pictures/video of students enjoying trips, guest lectures, competitions, presentations, careers events, work experience, placement years.  Graduation pictures/video and testimonials, graduates working  Profile academics’ research activity, links to academic blogs  Business-related news/videos | Testimonials from students to persuade external stakeholders that   * Students gain work experience through work placements and volunteering * Students graduate with business skills and are work-ready * Students enjoy their courses * Students enjoy a variety of extra-curricular activities * High levels of achievement * High levels of graduate employment * Contributions to the community – students volunteering   Business School is a thought-leader:   * Academics share business knowledge * Academics share business news * Academics share research findings | Sign up for an Open Day (parents/new students)  Apply for a course (new students)  Exhibit at a Careers Fair (employers)  Offer work experience/placement opportunities (employers)  Engage with the Business School by offering guest lectures, live case studies, research opportunities (employers)  Request expert advice of academics from the business school (academic communities and media) |

**Appendix 1:** Social Media activity planning using the AIDA and 5S’s models

**Appendix 2** Examples of monthly Edurank overviews

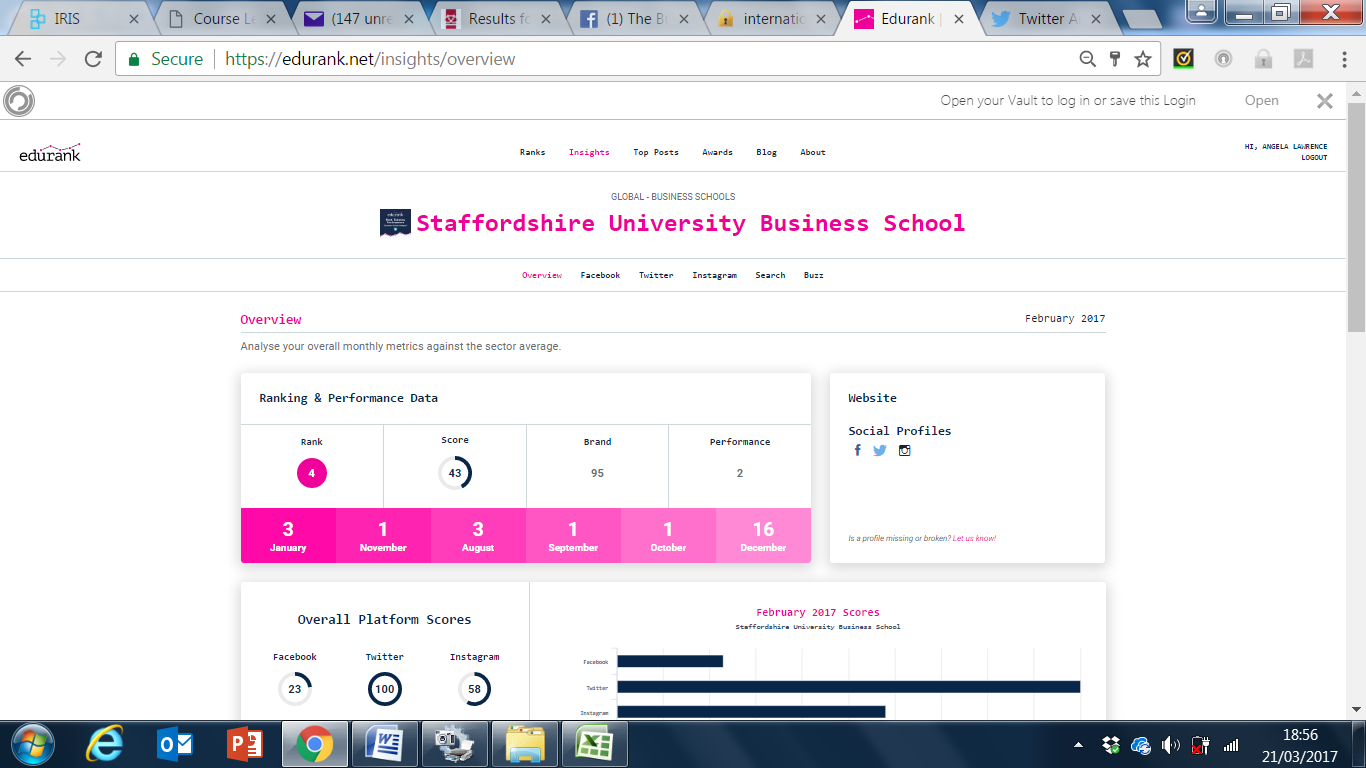
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| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Jan 17 |  |  |  |  |  |  | Overall Platform Scores | | |
|  | Ranking | Followers | Posts | Engagements | Searches | Social Mentions | Facebook | Twitter | Instagram |
| Business School | 3 | 1545 (+4%) | 261 (+125%) | 522  (+56%) | 40 | 1,290 | 72 | 86 | 64 |
| Sector Benchmark |  | 81,171 | 86 | 3,256 | 11,035 | 929 |  |  |  |

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Feb 17 |  |  |  |  |  |  | Overall Platform Scores | | |
|  | Ranking | Followers | Posts | Engagements | Searches | Social Mentions | Facebook | Twitter | Instagram |
| Business School | 4 | 1619 (+5%) | 323 (+24%) | 898  (+72%) | 40 | 1,688  (+31%) | 23 | 100 | 58 |
| Sector Benchmark |  | 82,698 | 96 | 3,855 | 11,767 | 935 |  |  |  |

**Appendix 3** Edurank score elements

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**Appendix 4: Edurank rankings over a 6 month period (*source*** [***www.edurank.net***](http://www.edurank.net)**)**

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