Facebook: Supporting first year students

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The First Seven Weeks programme aims to support first year students during their first seven weeks at the University of Limerick, Ireland. Through Facebook, students are provided with support on topics such as finding their way around campus; developing study skills; time management; health and well-being.

1. The First Year Experience – Transition Guidance to University

Transition to university is defined as a process that takes place during the first few months of a student entering third level education and is characterised by the new academic, social and personal challenges that the student experiences. At university, students are required to develop competences to access information, participate in university life, face academic challenges, study and work abroad. With this in mind, we present the *First Seven Weeks*, a proactive transition programme underpinned by research, which promotes an open, flexible and systemic approach that coordinates the efforts and resources of multiple student support stakeholders at UL (Figure 1). The programme was successfully piloted at the beginning of the academic year 2010/11.

Figure 1: FSW programme and UL logo

Professor Sarah Moore, Associate Vice President Academic at UL, states that "with this programme we are recognising that successful early adjustment is linked to subsequent success. The first term at university is a thrilling time, but it can be scary too. The start of college is often a time when people feel a sudden lowering of their confidence" (Irish Examiner 2010). The *First Seven Weeks* programme per week as follows:

1. Welcome, settling in and finding your way around
2. Study skills and time management
3. Health and wellbeing
4. Meet your advisor

5. Learner support centres
6. Career and civic engagement awareness
7. Critical thinking and longer term planning

A working group was assigned to each weekly theme and they developed and sourced online materials that could be communicated to students through Facebook along with innovative face to face on-campus events.

2. Why Facebook?

In recent years, the success of Internet social networks has revolutionised how we understand computer mediated communication (CMC). An investigation by Eurostat (in Redecker et al.2010) reveals that 73% of all Europeans between 16 and 24 years use the Internet to communicate through social media. According to a report by YouthNet (Hulme 2009), 75% of those in this age group stated that they cannot live without the Internet, and 82% of those questioned stated that they use the Internet to seek advice or information. According to ECAR (2009) there is a major increase in the usage of social networking tools among undergraduate students (in Figure 2), resulting in these

tools now shaping how college students connect to the world and with each other. Educators are now realising the potential of social networking tools and are experimenting with them for a variety of reasons, including communication with students, enhancement of the first year student experience along with innovative assessment techniques to keeping in touch (OKeeffe and Igbrude 2010).

A 'Facebook page' was chosen as the main communication tool for the First Seven Weeks programme due to a number of reasons:

1. A Facebook page is free of charge and provides a customised URL for your a page, which aided in the marketing and promotion of the programme (www.facebook.com/first-7weeks)

2. The Facebook audience in Ireland is currently reaching 2,006,200 users, roughly half the population of the country. 46.7% of the Facebook audience in Ireland are male and 53.3% are female. 23.7% of the audience in Ireland are in the 18-24 years age group and 31% are in the 25-34 years age group (Figure 3).
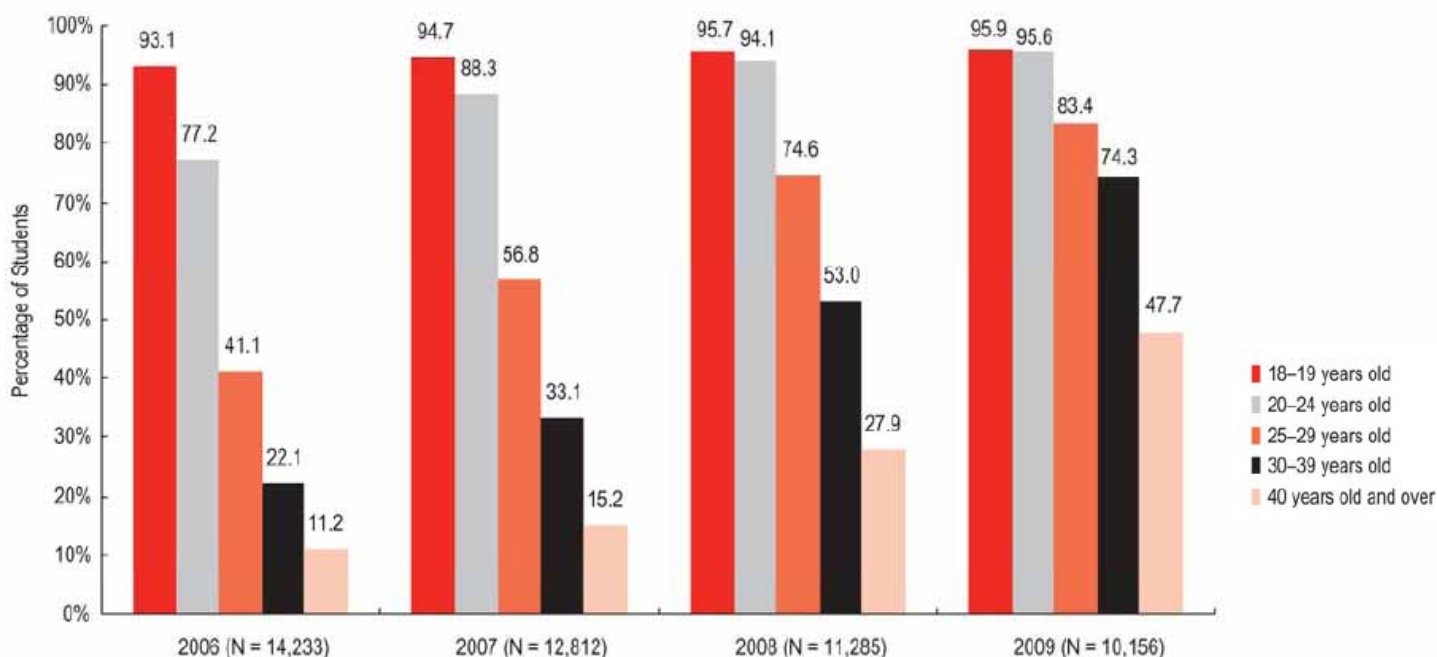
*Data for four-year comparisons are based on student responses from the 39 institutions that participated in each of the 2006, 2007, 2008, and 2009 studies. Although institutions remained the same, the actual students responding each year were different.

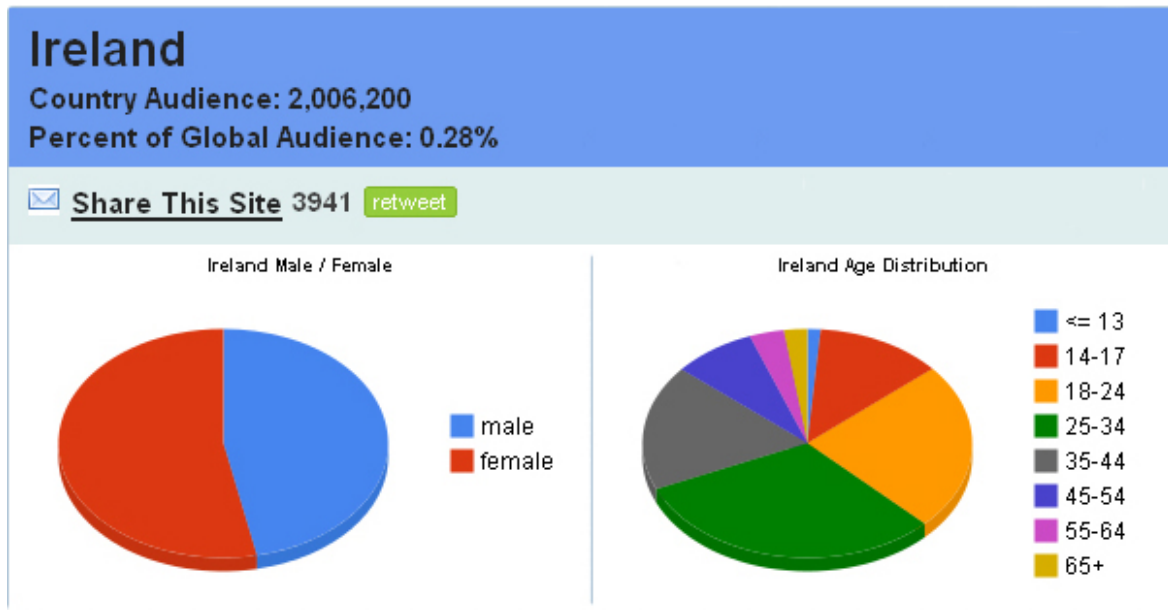Figure 2: Percentage of students who had used social networking websites (ECAR 2009)

Figure 3: Facebook usage in Ireland (Check Facebook 2011)

3. The First Seven Weeks and Facebook

Although Facebook was used as the central communication tool for each weekly theme, for example the 'Events' tab was used to disseminate on campus events to students to ensure that they were aware of all events that were taking place on campus. The 'Wall' was the most popular method of communication with students; this was used to enable students to access a variety of online materials and resources related to each of the weekly themes, for example, links to websites and interactive activities, including videos and photos of the university and on-campus events (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Wall of the Facebook site for the First Seven Weeks programme

4. Facebook Page Usage

During the *First Seven Weeks* the Facebook page received 760 'likes', which resulted in these students receiving a constant feed of information and announcements from the Facebook page to their own Facebook profiles. The page also generated 1,175 monthly viewers in September 2010 during the first four-five weeks of the semester.

Overall, users of the FSW Facebook page were divided equally between genders (Figure 5). The majority of traffic (74%) to the

FSW page was from the '18-24' (first years transitioning from second to third level) age group category, followed by the '25-24' (potential mature students or first time postgraduate students) (14.2%) age group category.

612 users of the page listed Ireland as their home country on their personal profiles, however, as the results below show a wide variety of students from other countries were also involved (Figure 6).
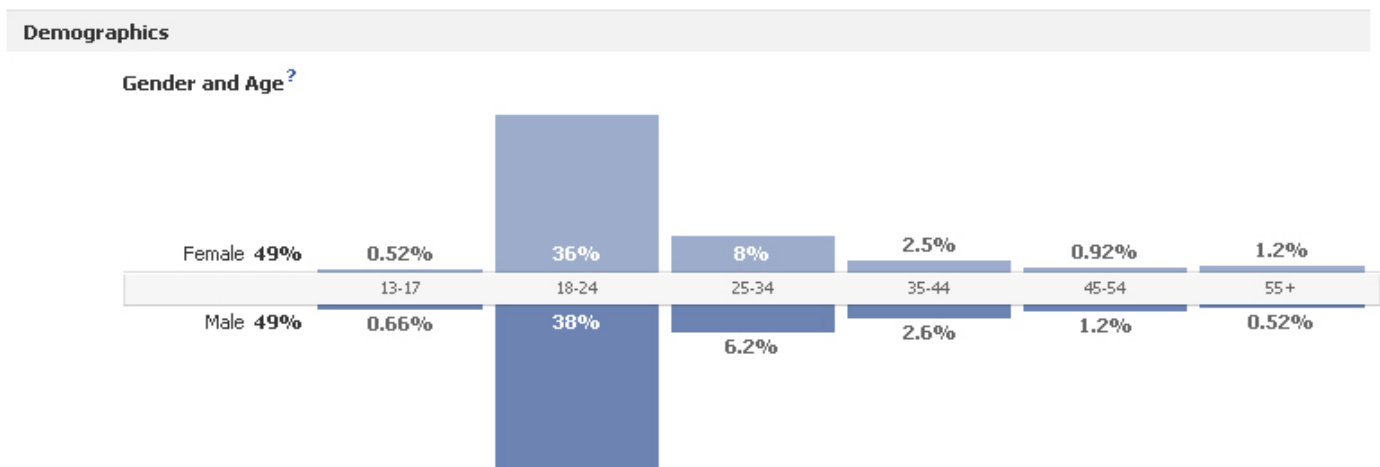

Figure 5: Distribution per age and gender or the Facebook site

Figure 6: 'Home country' of the Facebook site users

Conclusion

Generally, high levels of satisfaction with the FSW transition experience were found across campus and the FSW initiative is being implemented for the current, 2011/2012, academic year. This year's FSW initiative will incorporate a more media driven use of the Facebook page, or example, experienced students and staff have been invited to leave video messages for new students using the weekly themes.

However, the use of social networks in formal learning environments poses many challenges to be further explored, as it falls amid the traditional boundaries between students' academic and personal space. The European Commission (2010) report also pointed to differences in motivation to learn and engagement not conducive to learning as major challenges in mainstreaming Web 2.0 in education. There is a possibility that some students could disengage with the social networking medium of communication, especially if it is used in isolation to on-campus initiatives. Social networking activities should align with institutional strategic goals and on-campus initiatives, for example orientation activities, peer mentoring programmes and problem based learning groups.

The FSW initiative constitutes a step forward in exploring the potential of online social networking technologies within a university environment, to generate a level of social presence that is conducive to active engagement within transitioning programmes/initiatives. The adoption of Web 2.0 technologies emphasises the group dimension of communication, offering immense possibilities for peer support in first year. There is also wide potential for research into the use of Web 2.0 in on-campus initiatives because, as indicated by Headlam-Wells et al. (2005) there is very little empirical research on the potential of CMC for student support programmes beyond the use of email, especially as regards the development of online communities that combine usability (human-computer interaction) and sociability (human-human interaction). The use of Internet social networks in the context of transition programmes can emphasise peer communication within a first year "community of belonging", encouraging new students' autonomous participation instead of dependency models.

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