

Guidance for academic staff

Opportunities and challenges of using LinkedIn as part of curriculum-based activities



With an international membership of more than 364 million users, LinkedIn is a social networking platform which encourages its users to share information about workplace skills and experience, sharing sector-specific knowledge and expertise through group forums and user posts. All LinkedIn users create a profile on the network. This is similar to an online CV but with the option to include links to their work. From this they are able to build a network of contacts.

Now widely used by graduate recruiters and with a firmly professional focus, the 'real world' information and opportunities contained within LinkedIn can be used to support activities relating to the development of subject knowledge, building commercial awareness, and establishing a professional online presence. It can be used to create awareness of the career pathways of alumni from particular degree specialisms within your organisation and as a tool for reflection with Personal and Professional Development Planning.

This guide outlines some of the opportunities and challenges of using LinkedIn within the curriculum.

Opportunities

LinkedIn can support a number of themes and activities including:

- Developing subject knowledge through LinkedIn groups
- Establishing a professional online presence through the creation of a LinkedIn Profile
- Building commercial awareness through following influencers and news channels
- Creating awareness of career pathways and sector-specific skills using "live" information about graduates from your institution's courses using the alumni tool
- Personal and Professional Development Planning using LinkedIn as a tool for reflection

Some practical tips for delivery of each of these themes using LinkedIn are given in the rest of this guide.

Developing subject knowledge through Linked groups

"My students see how alumni have progressed and what they have done to achieve their professional status. It gives them confidence in the degree relevance and the services the University provides towards their employability.

Alison McHale, Senior Lecturer, Work Based Groups, Sheffield Hallam University

LinkedIn has an array of group forums, both open (i.e. viewable by all users) and closed (i.e. requiring a request for access) on a variety of subject topics. These professional groups can help students to further their understanding of how their subject knowledge is used by professionals in the working world.

Alison McHale says about her students, "Second years start to link to professional groups e.g. speech and language therapy communities to understand the professional emphasis of the role. They learn how to style themselves towards the external world."

Setting up your own LinkedIn Group

You may wish to set up your own LinkedIn group to work with a specific group of students. This can foster a supportive environment in which to develop online networking skills and build confidence in students who don't feel ready to join other groups on LinkedIn.

Practicalities

Purpose

As with any LinkedIn Group, your group should have a clearly defined purpose.

- Plan your posts in advance;
- Ensure that your participants are aware of exactly how you are expecting them to engage with the group - are you expecting them to generate their own questions/topics or to just respond to topics that you've posted? How often are you expecting group members to participate in group discussion?
- Have clear rules about what is and isn't appropriate. This could include notes about language style (how formal/informal) and overall guidance about presenting yourself professionally online.

Membership

Consider a closed group to keep control of its membership.

As well as your student cohort, you can invite other members of LinkedIn to join your group. Are they subject-specific or industry-related professionals who can add their insight into your discussion, perhaps offering a one-off guest post? Perhaps there are recent alumni who could offer their perspective on a topic?

Before setting up a group, it is advisable that students have access to support on how to develop their profile on LinkedIn to ensure that their professional online presence enhances rather than discourages their networking opportunities on the platform.

Establishing professional online presence through a LinkedIn profile - encouraging students to become digitally distinct

- 1 billion names are searched on Google every day
- 94% of people only look at the first page of results

LinkedIn almost always appears on the first page of search results for a name. As a network with a focus on skills, experience and the working world, it can be a useful starting point for students to use as a place to develop their professional online presence. Students should be mindful of the specific context of 'professional online presence' that they are working within. This is easier if the student is studying for a qualification that leads naturally into their chosen career area, but more difficult if the student does not have specific career plans. It is useful to discuss with your students the concepts of an online presence and the impact this can have, which may be positive or negative.

LinkedIn, with its clear focus as a network where you present your 'professional self' can be particularly helpful for students who currently fit into the digital disastrous category (see *the box*

out 'The 4 Ds of online presence'). This may be particularly applicable to some mature students, but applies to all students who might be wary of taking what might be their first steps into online networks.

Note that unless a LinkedIn user selects the security option of hiding their profile from search engine results, their LinkedIn profile is likely to feature on the first page of results for anyone searching their name. Since graduate recruiters actively use LinkedIn, it is important that students keep their profile up-to-date, engaging, complete and free from spelling errors. Further advice on how to achieve this is given in the Challenges section later.

The 4 Ds of Online Presence

- **digital dabbling** - where there are few comments about you
- **digital disastrous** - where there is nothing about you
- **digital dirt** - where there are negative comments
- **digital distinct** - where there are a lot of results, all communicating what you want to say about yourself.

Source: Denise Taylor, chartered psychologist and career coach

<http://careers.theguardian.com/managing-online-reputation-advice>

Building Commercial Awareness

Commercial awareness is a key skill that candidates are often asked to demonstrate as part of graduate recruitment processes. However, it is also the skill that candidates often struggle to articulate according to graduate recruiters.

There are a number of ways that LinkedIn users can build their commercial awareness:

- Participating in groups can demonstrate an advance level of confidence and engagement with subject and sector knowledge.
- Following influencers - leading figures within a range of fields - can build awareness of fresh thinking and stimulate discussion.
- Following company information -increasingly companies are posting jobs on these pages
- Following sector information channels – this can give an overview of developments within a sector and may be particularly useful for students wanting to learn more generalist information about a business sector that is unfamiliar to them.

Creating awareness of career pathways and sector-specific skills

The alumni feature - which collates together all profiles from a particular institution - can provide useful information on career pathways and sector-specific skills.

Users can navigate this information by applying a range of filters including:

- What they do – the sector they are working in;

- What they studied - by subject;
- What they're skilled at - by skills from LinkedIn profiles;
- Where they live;
- Where they work - companies (with LinkedIn company pages);
- Degree of connection to the user.

This information could be used alongside the DLHE figures, for example, to build up a picture of routes into different careers. The skills section in particular can also help students to think about the skills they've listed in their own profile, helping them to spot skills that they haven't included which they'd either not appreciated as being relevant or have yet to acquire.

Some students can take this information a stage further. Equipped with the confidence to approach alumni from their institution, students can build relationships that may lead to unadvertised opportunities such as an internship. This can help to achieve a more level playing field of access to such networking opportunities that might previously have only existed for students with family connections to particular professions.

Personal and Professional Development Planning using LinkedIn as a tool for reflection

It is usually better to involve students in LinkedIn as soon as they come to university. Managing one's professional presence is a lifelong skill – not a one-off task. Building a LinkedIn profile can encourage students to develop a regular practice of recording and reflecting on their learning, their skill development, their achievements and their development planning. In other words, maintaining a LinkedIn profile throughout their time at university can make engagement with Personal and Professional Development Planning (PPDP) relevant and real for students.

Students need to grow their LinkedIn profile steadily and with care. Building a profile, and a reflective habit, with peers can help them to appreciate the extracurricular opportunities of being at university and allow them to develop their self-esteem in a safe, supported environment.

This can help them to gain a sense of where they are now, the directions they can take, the skills they need to acquire and the decisions they need to make to succeed.

See also the paper in this series: The PDP Connection

LinkedIn in the curriculum - challenges

As with the use of any platform that is external to an institution, the use of LinkedIn within curriculum activities can present a number of challenges.

LinkedIn - formative and summative assessment

Think carefully before deciding to assess a student's LinkedIn profile because, as with traditional CVs, it can be hard to define a 'good profile' and students can become confused by an array of conflicting opinions. It may be better to look at the extent of their engagement with the task, their attention to presented detail and the support they give peers in critiquing and developing profiles together.

Some students may have concerns about privacy or security and in certain circumstances you may need to consider offering alternative forms of assessment.

Working in partnership with your careers service

If you are including an assessment of a LinkedIn profile as part of your module assessment, then consider working in partnership with your careers team.



When to engage with LinkedIn

In the previous section the opportunity of engaging students in developing LinkedIn profiles soon after arriving at university was noted; however, there are also risks associated with this.

Students engaging with LinkedIn before they have the skills and knowledge to understand how to create a professional online presence could be detrimental to their future employment. It is strongly recommended that students are supported by tutors

initially and that a peer-supported approach is devised so that continuously developing profiles are critically reviewed.

Establishing a level-by-level framework can assist students to develop their profiles appropriately throughout their course. A suggested framework is attached in the appendix.

Conclusion

LinkedIn can be used to support a number of activities that you already offer. Students appreciate the 'live' nature of the platform, where the information may feel more real and tangible than, for example, reports of DLHE statistics.

There are clearly some challenges to formal assessment of activities carried out on LinkedIn profiles. However, the opportunities for students to develop their own professional presence on a platform where millions of people at varying stages of their career journey are also developing their professional presence, adds a valuable context to this activity and can offer students further benefits such as potential networking opportunities, that can further enhance what LinkedIn describes as their "professional journey" in a way that a stand-alone, inward-looking in-house platform cannot.

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APPENDIX

Using LinkedIn to support the development of a professional online identity and professional network - by level.

Level	Developing Professional Online Identity	Developing Professional Networks	LinkedIn areas that support this
Level 4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To have a basic understanding of what online professional presence means. To understand how to use LinkedIn to establish a professional online identity through establishing a profile. To understand how to take steps to "clean up" their online presence. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To understand the concept of building a professional network and the benefits of doing so. Establishing an online network of peers. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Profile Connections
Level 5 or Preparing for placement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To have a developed understanding of what online professional presence means in their chosen career area e.g. selecting sector specific skills on profile. For students who do not have a specific career area in mind, then a profile that reflects an awareness of skills common to a range of graduate recruiters. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Further developing a network including peers, employers, mentors, advisors. An awareness of key online influencers relevant to a chosen career sector. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Profile Connections Employers Pulse (sector information and influencers) Endorsements
On Placement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To use knowledge gained "in the field" on placement to further enhance their professional profile on LinkedIn e.g. developing their skills section, including projects. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Developing a network including the above, plus connections made on placement including: managers, connections made at conferences, workshops or other events attended during placement year. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Profile Connections (including the How We Met Feature) Recommendations
Levels 6 or 7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To have established a "digitally distinct" professional online identity on LinkedIn through: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> posting contributing to professional 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Continuing to develop a network including peers, employers, mentors, connections made while on placement and academic staff. To actively seek out new connections including SHU 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Profile (including elements other than text) Connections (including How We Met Feature) Groups Posting

	discussion on groups	alumni in relevant geographical or sector specific areas.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Alumni Feature
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