Exploring the use of 'WeChat' as a social media tool to engage Chinese students
University of Sheffield

Background to the project

The University of Sheffield currently has over 4,000 Chinese students and an alumni network of over 11,000 students. Engaging with Chinese students, encouraging their integration with British culture, and creating and promoting a globally-minded culture within Sheffield have become the key elements of the university's Internationalisation Strategy. To effectively engage the Chinese student community, innovative communication channels need to be explored and utilised.

From past experience and preliminary research, we realised that traditional social media platforms do not attract many Chinese students. This is partially due to the fact that these social media platforms have been blocked in China. Very few Chinese students have Twitter or Facebook accounts when they arrive in the UK. In addition, Chinese students have a cultural tendency to rely on their peer group as the main source of information. Often, information sent from the university via emails or Facebook, is overlooked by this group of students.

WeChat, also known as 'Weixin' in Chinese, is a social media app developed by Tencent in China. This project found that WeChat has been used by a number of institutions in the

UK, but the majority of these accounts are created for marketing purposes. By recognising the popularity of WeChat among Chinese students, this project aimed to promote the international student support services available at The University of Sheffield for Chinese students, with a special focus on immigration, integration and career placement and development opportunities. This is also a continuation of the work that the University of Sheffield has been implementing on engaging Chinese students and understanding their particular needs.

Project outcomes

The strength of this project lies in the fact that it is one of the first to explore the use of WeChat as a social media tool to promote international student support services and to engage Chinese students. Information published via the WeChat account helped Chinese students realise the benefits of learning about British culture, engaging with the range of student communities, and integrating with the city and other international students to form part of the wider #Weareinternational campaign. It is a trusted university channel for Chinese students to receive first-hand and immediate information on immigration, integration and placement opportunities.

The project enabled the University of Sheffield to develop a better understanding of the needs of Chinese students and how services provided could be improved to support them better. The university also benefited from this project in engaging with Chinese alumni and subsequently supporting student recruitment, experience and employability.

Set up and evaluation

The International Student Support team and the Careers Service team worked together and created a public WeChat account in April 2016. Building from the experiment, this project was launched to further explore the use of WeChat.

The project was collaboratively managed by the International Student Support Team and the Careers Service at the University of Sheffield. The project team was expanded in early 2017 with two student assistants to form a WeChat working group. All members in the group met on a regular basis and worked collaboratively on the project. The team composed and published posts (see below), responded to queries, monitored subscriptions, conducted questionnaires, focus groups and interviews, analysed data collected from students and made improvements on the forum.

An 'Ask the WeChat team' event to promote online app

Our initial posts focussed on the area of providing information on immigration and integration as well as employment placement opportunities for current Chinese students. For immigration advice, it provided information on renewing a Tier 4 student visa, working conditions, Tier 4 student visa responsibilities, safeguarding of BRP and visa implications on change of programme. Later, we added information on applying for a Schengen visa, the Doctorate Extension Scheme, Tier 2 & Tier 5 visa routes, and inviting family members to visit the UK. Our account also gave students information on 'Global Campus' which is a series of events and workshops that help students to settle into life in the UK and gain as much as possible from their experience at the University of Sheffield. In addition, the account advertised placement opportunities specially created for Chinese students, and shared practical guidance from preparing a CV to 'best performance' at interviews.

The project was (and will continue to be) evaluated by student feedback through an online questionnaire, informal focus groups and interviews.

The project was also evaluated by monitoring students' participation in careers service events. For example, before it was promoted by using WeChat, an employability skill session for international students organised by the Careers Service had fewer than 10 registered students. After the session was promoted on WeChat, the number of students registered increased to more than 100 overnight.

A final evaluation meeting was also conducted within the WeChat team. Everyone who had been involved with the project participated. Data collection and analysis, student feedback, and changes introduced on the WeChat platform were discussed, and a plan for future work was drawn up.

Timescale

The project ran from August 2016 to the end of June 2017. The work was carried out in five stages as outlined below.

Stage	Timescales	Milestones
1	August – mid-October 2016	Promoting the WeChat account
2	September – December 2016	Communicating and improving content
3	December 2016 – February 2017	First round of data collection
4	February – May 2017	Data analysis, improving content based on feedback from the first round data collection
5	April – June 2017	Second round data collection and analysis
6	July 2017	Final evaluation and report write-up

Challenges

There were several challenges in the running of this project:

- For staff, committing time to take on the project in addition to daily job responsibilities proved difficult. This was especially challenging at the early stages during the busiest period of the academic year, ie September to early November. As the project progressed, the WeChat account attracted more followers and the expectation on the quality of the content also increased. This meant greater effort was required on preparing and composing posts

and engaging with students.

- It was challenging to make improvement in addition to maintaining the daily operation, due to team capacities. Extra resources had to be obtained from other channels to fill the staffing budget gap.

- The data collection process took much longer than planned because of the difficulties in recruiting a sufficient number of students to take part in the questionnaires, focus groups and interviews. Although announcements were made on WeChat repeatedly and incentives were provided for participation, the response rate was not as good as had been expected. The reason behind this was unknown, but busy study schedules could be a contributing factor.

Sustainability

Thanks to the UKCISA grant and the support from various departments at the University of Sheffield, the WeChat account has been further developed since it was initially created in April 2016. More resources have been made available to gather student feedback and this resulted in further improvement. The feedback, focus group discussions and WeChat content produced are useful to create a sustainable resource depository. The WeChat account has become an important and powerful additional social media platform to widen student awareness on the support services available at the university. In the longer term, it would be useful to embed the project in the standard services provided for international students. Possible options include employing a student editor, or a student or staff volunteer to set time aside to work on the WeChat, similar to the way the University currently manages other official social media channels (for example, Facebook, Twitter and Instagram). The continued running of the WeChat account also provides students with opportunities of working in a UK office environment, which further develops their employability skills as well as enriching their experience in the UK. This matches the initiatives of the Careers Service's placement programme, which provides students with a bursary as well as mentor support.

Key findings and learning points

Questionnaires, focus group and interviews were used to gather student feedback on the work produced by the WeChat account. Key findings and learning points are:

- Cross-platform promotion is essential. For example, working closely with the university's other social media channels including the WeChat/Weibo accounts (mainly used for marketing purposes), Facebook and international student e-newsletter. Based on this principle, the project team worked collaboratively with other key sections at the university, including the Confucius Institute, the Students' Union, the Corporate Communications team and the Chinese Students' and Scholars' Association.

- The students who are following the WeChat account use a wide range of social media channels, but WeChat is their choice when asked to choose only one social media platform. Students are pleasantly surprised that the university created a WeChat account and welcome this as an additional communication channel on social media.

- The followers are not limited to Chinese nationals. The number of postgraduate taught student followers is higher than the number of undergraduate students. The account has more female followers than their fellow male students.

- Student preference on when to read posts on WeChat varies, but the most favourable time is after 6pm in the evening.

- There is no particular preference among students on the language used in a WeChat post; that is, it is not necessary to publish posts in Chinese to attract readers. The results from both rounds of data collection point to the same conclusion.

- The types of posts that attract more reads and engagement are in the subjects regarding university achievements (ranking,

development and alumni), emotional topics and events. For example, the top three popular posts on the WeChat account are 'Our university rises in QS world ranking, we are top 100!', 'Students vote university of Sheffield top of Russell Group and third best university nationally' and 'Celebration of the Lunar New Year'. Student feedback confirms that they are proud of the University's achievements and therefore prefer to share posts on these topics with their friends and families. This also shows that original content is the key to attracting readership.

- Students prefer the posts styled with more visual elements such as pictures, embedded videos, etc. Plain text with detailed instructions does not generate great interest.

- It has not been an issue to manage queries posted on WeChat even though there is a 48-hour time limit on replying to a query. An automatic reply is in place to ensure that students can always contact the WeChat team by email as an alternative.

- It is important to publish information when students need it the most. Posts are archived in different categories and keyword search function is added to help students find the relevant information more easily when needed.

- Student feedback collected from focus groups and online questionnaires show that Chinese students are not aware of the full range of student support services available at the university. For example, one student commented **'More information about how to adapt new culture and study style would be helpful. … If someone (had) told me about all the services I can get from the university such as workshop from 301, writing advisory service and career services at the beginning of the semester, I guess life would be easier.'**

In addition, posts on topics about available support services at the University, for example, guidance on academic conduct and appeals, chaplaincy service and counselling service, attracted great interest among our followers. Students commented on WeChat that such information is vital for their study and life at the University, but they were not aware of the procedures and support before reading the information on WeChat.

This lack of awareness was the case across all areas that the WeChat account aimed to promote, including immigration advice, integration programmes and placement opportunities.

- The WeChat account not only helps the university to recruit students, but also helps to build a closer relationship with them. Throughout the project, the team got to know many students through both online interactions and offline events. Students provide valuable feedback and suggestions on the WeChat account, which subsequently improves the service provided through WeChat. This platform creates a better understanding and a stronger bond between Chinese students and the University.

Recommendations for other UK institutions

- To set up a WeChat public account is easy and free. However, it is not straightforward to make the account a verified one. To do so, a China Business License is required and this can be difficult for organisations outside China. Unverified accounts still work but these will be shown as personal accounts rather than official accounts on WeChat.

- To promote a WeChat public account, the most effective way is to display the QR code of the account whenever and wherever possible. Planning online and offline events can also help attract followers. For example, the WeChat team organised an online Q&A event and offline 'Ask the WeChat team' events followed by prize draw activities to spread the word and promote the account.

- A public WeChat account is not just another official platform to disseminate official news. It is useful to post interesting content on a regular basis so that student followers can feel that they are receiving special attention. In addition, students may decide to follow the account if they read an

interesting post shared by existing followers. To grow the subscriber base, it is essential to make the content interesting so that people are willing to share.

- It is important to have a dedicated member of staff or a team in place to manage the account. One of the most important elements in managing a public account is to engage with the followers. Having a dedicated team to communicate with students is also a useful way for the University to establish closer relationships with them.

- Support from student assistants is another important factor to consider. Student assistants have much more in-depth knowledge and experience in using and managing the WeChat account. They help write the posts in appropriate language to the target audience. This identifies less well known university information and services to the Chinese student population. Use of popular 'internet language' (the informal language used on the internet that people often adopt to simplify and update formal language) could also generate greater interest from student followers.

- Public WeChat accounts are restricted to one post a day although there is a function available to include different topics within one post. It is therefore essential to plan ahead about what to put in a post and when to publish in the academic cycle.

- Involving students is incredibly powerful. A lot of feedback from students is gathered and this forms the foundation for the work and the improvement required. It is crucial to understand what students want and need and how they prefer the information to be delivered.

Resources

- WeChat promotional flyer, poster, postcard and plasma screen slides
- Templates for questionnaires/focus group/interview (with translation to Mandarin) (email project lead to request)
- WeChat backstage demonstration PowerPoint (email project lead to request)
- Two facilitators who can speak Mandarin.

Further information

This project was run by Fang Zheng, International Student Adviser, The University of Sheffield

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International student web video information
University of Dundee

Project aims

The overall aim of this collaborative project between Student Support Advisors, the International Advice Service and current international students was to create a series of short accessible videos. These online resources for international students will enable new international students to better prepare themselves to come to university in the UK (particularly Scotland) and help them adjust to living and studying in a new country, culture and climate.

Rationale for the project

Feedback from international students told us they would like more information and knowledge on a range of subjects with regard to living and studying in the UK/ Scotland, for instance, weather/climate, time (daylight hours in winter/summer), academic differences, language, food, and culture. These are some of the most common aspects of changing country that had the most impact on students personally and they needed some time to acclimatise to these and adapt. By using the personal commentary of actual international students on the videos we believed it would help to address the needs of incoming internationals making that transition. We also thought that if student expectations can be realistically managed by providing information and support, in this way, to new international students this could enhance the overall student experience and therefore be of importance to institutions and the sector as a whole.

Outcomes

Six videos have been produced featuring international students talking about their personal experiences. The videos can be found on the university website on the International Advice Service pages and have links from other places on the university website, eg Welcome pages and online student toolkits. They will be utilised at welcome events for new international students and on flat screens in our new "Global Lounge" when it opens in mid-October 2018.
(See the end of this report for a link to the videos).

Background

University of Dundee sits within the city of Dundee (with a population of 148, 270 in 2016) in Scotland. The university has 18,000 students from 145 countries and 3,000 staff from 72 countries. It has around 15,000 students on campus of whom 3,000 are international (this includes EU students). There are nine academic schools and a range of directorates, including Professional Services, one of which is Student Services. Internationalisation is key to the university's strategic aims: see www. dundee.ac.uk/international/ internationalisationattheuniversity.
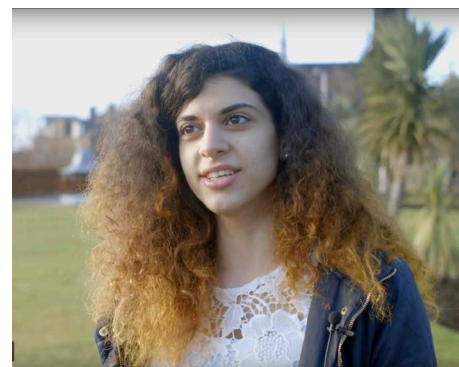
Project set-up and evaluation

The project team invited international students from different countries to help us make videos by speaking about their experience of different aspects of living in the UK/ Scotland. We were successful in finding students to represent Asia (Pakistan and China), Africa and Southern Europe. We were unable to get someone from either North or South America. We invited the students to meet with the staff organising the project and the professional videographer who would be filming and editing the project. After consultation and a discussion with this group of international students, six topics were chosen for the videos. These were:
- Accent
- Asking for help
- Culture
- Environment
- Food
- Social life

Initially we thought we would use scripts for the videos when we were planning the project, but it was decided after our discussion with the

students and the videographer that it was better that they were unscripted, as it was more natural. The students involved then decided what they would say about the different topic areas they had chosen to cover.

Our original plan was to gather the students together to film the videos at one time and provide lunch for them collectively on the day of filming. This plan had to be re-thought as it became clear that the students would have to be filmed individually on different days to fit with their schedules and other commitments. The videographer liaised directly with the students around their commitments and also his own schedule. This meant that he could spend a bit of time with the students ensuring they were relaxed and not looking anxious or nervous whilst they were being filmed. As we had chosen to film outdoors around campus we could also ensure that the weather was suitable for filming.

After filming, a rough edit was prepared by the videographer. This was then viewed by the staff involved in the project and some of the senior managers within Student Services. Some further minor edits were required and some additional filming. This was carried out over the following month, again taking into account the commitments of both the students and the videographer. The final footage was then shown to the students involved. The two students who could not attend the screening were sent the videos. Once the videos were completed they were shown to one of the university's External Relations managers for final approval for use on the website. This took longer than anticipated and delayed the evaluation process until October 2017.

Timeline

September 2016. There were two initial meetings held in September

2016 to plan the project with the members of staff involved.

October 2016. Initially we asked international students to come to a meeting in early October if they wished to participate in the video project. After this initial discussion, it became clear that our original planned timelines were unlikely to happen, particularly as all the filming could not happen on one day as originally anticipated.

November 2016. The filming was not completed until the end of November.

January 2017. The first edit was available.

February 2017. First viewing of the rough edited version was available. The team suggested further edits and additional filming. The videographer had to make arrangements with some of the students and one of the International Advice Team to do the extra filming which took a few weeks to organise and complete.

April 2017. We invited the students involved to come and view the videos in April – those unable to attend were sent the videos to view. As the videos had not yet been seen by our External Relations team we could not get them uploaded in April as planned. The feedback from the team meant some further captioning was required.

August 2017. Videos were in place on our International Advice pages for August 2017 to use during our welcome activities for new international students in September 2017. We planned to evaluate the videos (see Appendix) in October 2017 with our incoming students using an online survey, which is considerably later than originally planned. We aim to share this with UKCISA in January 2018 and it will be available on the UKCISA website.

Challenges

- Working with many different students with different time commitments proved to be challenging as our plan to have everyone together doing the filming was not feasible.
- We had to fit in with the other work that the professional videographer had planned.
- The weather had to be taken into account as we had chosen external locations on campus. This was quieter and there was less likelihood of interruptions than inside buildings during the semester although we did have to factor in occasional sirens and aircraft noise.
- We also had to take into account the views of our External Relations team within the university as they manage the website content and this led to delays in getting students to see the videos and give us their feedback.
- The extra edits and filming required meant using the budget allocated originally for catering.
- Staff availability due to sickness and leave also impacted on our estimated timescales.

Sustainability

The videos should be useable for several years as the topics the students are talking about on the videos are not going to change. The project should be able to be replicated in other universities using their own international students.

Learning points

We would allow more time for the project and also devote a larger budget to the videography to cover further editing or filming required. It may have been better to involve our External Relations team earlier.

Recommendations for other UK institutions

- Ensure that you have a professional videographer with the ability to do editing as this makes the process easier for both the students and staff involved. The end result is much better – more professional and watchable.
- Budget for any extra editing and filming that may be required.
- Having a small project team and not too many students involved helps to make the project more manageable.
- Involve students: they like to be asked and to get involved.
- It is important to get a balance of viewpoints from different perspectives and cultural backgrounds.
- Get your web team involved at an early stage.

Further information

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Link to the videos:
https://www.dundee.ac.uk/international/support/

Appendix

Proposed evaluation for international student web video information project, University of Dundee.

1. Have you viewed the International Student Videos about living in the UK/Dundee on the International Advice website page?
   - ☐ Yes
   - ☐ No

1a. If yes, are these videos helpful to you as a new international student?
   - ☐ Yes
   - ☐ No
   - ☐ Unsure

2. When do you think these have been most helpful to you as a new international student?
   - ☐ Before applying for a place at university
   - ☐ On arrival at the university
   - ☐ Some time after arrival at the university
   - ☐ Unsure

3. When would you suggest that new international students should be able to see these videos?

4. Are there any other topics you would like to see available for new international students on video?

5. Where would you suggest that these videos be best placed for new international students to view?
   - ☐ University International Advice website pages
   - ☐ Admissions pages for international student applicants
   - ☐ University's Welcome pages
   - ☐ University Facebook page
   - ☐ YouTube
   - ☐ Other (if other please state)

6. Is there anything else that you would like to say about the videos?
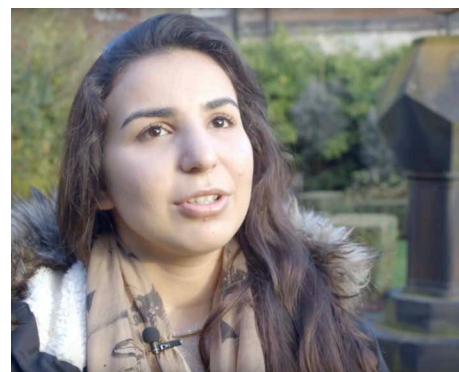
Above and on page 7: stills from six videos featuring international students talking about their personal experiences about living and studying in Scotland.