Sharing knowledge and learning through the digital gateway

by Blog Admin   August 8, 2011

In helping academics to overcome the challenges of impact and engagement, some universities are setting up digital centres to distribute useful resources and guidance. **Eleanor Lovell** *discusses the University of Warwick's Knowledge Centre and the ways it seeks to assist academics in increasing their impact.*

It is a complex and challenging time for universities. Changes in student funding, decreased levels of public sector spending, specific cuts to university teaching grants, and the recent White Paper on Higher Education all present new hurdles. Additionally, academics have to juggle a move towards open courseware, the increasing need to demonstrate 'impact', a demand to add value to the learning experience and a push to increase public engagement.

In helping academics to navigate this ever growing web of challenges, some universities are setting up new initiatives, putting in place useful resources and providing specially trained staff. The University of Warwick Knowledge Centre is one such initiative, launched in July last year as a pilot project with the aim of providing a public digital gateway to the university's world class expertise and research. Bridging the gap between academic journals and the news media, it employs writers and journalists to work with academics and help tell the story of their research in a way that is accessible and engaging, as well as inviting staff and students to contribute articles and learning resources themselves.

Engaging in new ways
In an era of permission marketing, online attention spans are short. As such, Knowledge Centre staff are constantly trying to think of new ways to engage the audience, for example by providing opportunities to interact with academics and the student community through "live chats," providing resources for learning, and facilitating video and audio coverage of Warwick events.

All of this content relies on the time investment of members of the university community, so an equally important part of the project has been to work out how this platform, and the team behind it, can support them. For those looking to communicate their research activities the most immediate thing the Knowledge Centre can offer is a growing audience and not just an audience of external users – we have found that the academic community value the increased connectivity that it affords to their colleagues, highlighting research and activities that they might not otherwise have know about, and so spreading the impact of research wider.

Digital publishing and OER
University departments and individuals are increasingly interested in the digital space and the potential for demonstrating impact and public engagement. A growing number of academics and researchers are publishing articles online and contributing to various personal and group blogs. Complementing this, the Knowledge Centre aims to create an agile digital space for the university to develop new and existing initiatives – although it is early days there is scope to use this online space to provide more in-depth learning opportunities, by sign posting e-learning opportunities arising in different departments or publishing learning resources ourselves. The US is leading the OER movement with initiatives such as MIT OpenCourseWare, Open Yale, and Harvard University Extension School. Despite the differences between UK and US Higher Education systems, the US model provides a framework towards which the UK can aspire.

Future Developments

The key to the development of this tool will be to understand the diversity of our audiences and their needs. We keenly capture feedback and insight from the various people whom the Knowledge Centre brings together, and looking forward, we are discussing ways to develop the functionality of the site to provide different levels of engagement; how we can aggregate content more effectively from blogs and other department sites; how we can collaborate with departments more effectively where there is crossover of activities; how we can increase our community and contributors amongst other things.

From the outset of the project we have been keen to stress that the Knowledge Centre is not just a website, but an approach to communicating research and learning. We have achieved a lot during the pilot project and we are keen to use the lessons learned to demonstrate the impact of our research and add value to the learning experience at the university in the future.

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